

CURING CONFLICT

Find Remedies for Workplace Conflict



By Mark Harris

The ability of health care teams to provide quality patient care depends largely on having an organizational culture shaped by effective communication, respectful relationships, and a shared dedication to the patient care mission. A positive, cooperative work environment where staff work well together is integral to health system performance.[1]

As a large and complex industry, health care is also a demanding and often stressful environment. Whether the demands involve clinical or administrative responsibilities, the health care system undoubtedly asks a lot of its workforce. In this challenging environment, conflict is unavoidable. From workforce and organizational pressures to patient care issues and more, health care professionals must invariably contend with differing perspectives, disagreements, tensions, and other stressors.

But while conflict may be an inevitable part of the medical system, its negative impact or outcomes are not. Conflict management skills can help leaders and managers, clinicians, and staff navigate these challenges in ways that promote staff well-being, organizational improvement, and quality patient care.

Why Conflict Matters

While the terms *conflict management* or *conflict resolution* might imply that all conflict is negative or harmful, this is not the case.

"It's important to understand that conflict itself is not bad," says Kimberly Best, RN, MA, a St. Louis–based conflict management expert and former emergency room and intensive care unit nurse. "Conflict is important; conflict is natural. It means there's a problem to solve or a misunderstanding that can be smoothed over. It means there's room for improvement. So, conflict in itself is not the enemy. Conflict escalation becomes the problem. That happens when we have a conflict that maybe we should be able to solve between us, but we don't have the tools to do it. And so, the conflict gets buried until it gets so big that catastrophic things happen, like a big staff turnover or patient

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accidents. Or it gets mishandled and comes out in aggression."

Accordingly, when ongoing conflict is left unaddressed or poorly handled, it can corrode not only staff satisfaction and performance, but also patient safety and care. "Conflict matters in health care because it does affect patient outcomes," says Best. "There is research where we see mortality and infection rates in hospital units [go] up with unresolved conflict. When we're in conflict, we don't hear one another as well. We're holding grudges we don't even know we're holding, which makes us unable to bring our best [selves] all the time. From job satisfaction to patient safety, there are just a lot of reasons why conflict matters."

Whether conflict in health systems is resolved in a timely and productive way will depend largely on how the team, practice, or organization responds. Do they have the competency and resources to resolve tensions and disagreements in ways that lead to desired outcomes?

"I have a slide that I use for every health care training that I give," remarks Best. "It's a quote from Michelle Gelfand, a Stanford psychologist and professor of organizational behavior. She writes, 'Learning the appropriate way to handle conflict in a hospital, if you're a doctor or a nurse, is just as important as any medical training.' "[2]

This observation extends to every member of the health care team, adds Best. The message is to consider conflict management skills an essential, staff-wide resource.

"Medical assistants in particular sit at the intersection of nearly every single relationship in a clinic," says Best. "They're between the patients, the providers, the nurses, and the office staff. They're often the first one who sees a patient when they come in upset or the last if they leave upset. They sit in a place where there are a lot of dynamics occurring, and sometimes they have great voice and their input matters. And sometimes, because health care can be a hierarchy, it doesn't. What I try to do, especially in practices or ambulatory care centers where medical assistants are used more, is to help develop a team that realizes that every single person's input is just as important as the others."

> "While patient care is what drives health care services, it's important to understand how much quality care relies on the state of the work culture. I worked with a practice whose primary goal was a great patient experience, and that's honorable. But what they forgot is [that] they can also have a great workplace experience. They were committed to treating their clients and patients well but had forgotten about treating one another well. They never had that conversation even after years in business. Our goal was to help them design a system where they could define respect. We want to be respectful to each other. So what does that look like? When things get escalated, how can we sit down and talk about it? It's about rehumanizing the people we're working with."
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> —Kimberly Best, RN, MA

From an organizational or systems perspective, Best offers a more encompassing or holistic view of the conflict management challenge. "I am big on systems design, and your office is a system," she observes. "The whole health care system we are in is also a system, but each office is its own system. The people within that system need to be part of the voice that decides how that system is going to operate. Everyone first needs to be educated in how to manage conflict, why we have different capacities or do things differently, and how to understand the roots and causes of conflict."

In turn, the goal of organizations should be to move beyond conflict management per se, responding or reacting to conflict as it occurs, toward what Best describes as a more enduring "conflict ecosystem" in the organization.[3] This means building an organizational environment or culture where the sources of conflict can be addressed by those directly affected, using practical skills and shared agreements developed within the department, team, or organization.

The idea is to build conflict competency organically throughout the organization, explains Best, forging a skilled workforce culture versed in conversation skills that understands the norms for disagreement and can offer solution-oriented organizational responses. Critically, a conflict ecosystem should respond in a timely, proactive way to minor conflicts or tensions before they escalate into larger problems or crises.[4]

Under Pressure

In today's workforce, the idea of a conflict ecosystem is perhaps more relevant than ever, given the pressures many health systems face. In fact, as health care has evolved over recent decades, the potential for conflict has further intensified. Experts point to several reasons for this.

"Health care has evolved significantly over time from a business that once was run primarily by medical professionals who didn't necessarily have business acumen to one that has elevated the role of business professionals as partners," says Richard Birke, chief architect and lead facilitator for JAMS Pathways, a conflict resolution and training organization based in Irvine, California. "This marriage or integration has resulted in different kinds of cultural expectations of how business ought to be run. That's been one source of conflict in health care. In addition, with an aging population [and] increasing complexity in the practice, economics, and regulation of the modern workforce generally, there are more pressures on medical organizations and the people who work there than decades ago. Even though it was always a high-pressure profession, I think there is higher stress now."

Unfortunately, health care professionals may not always be well-versed in conflict management skills, adds Birke, nor recognize the need for education or training in this area. "A lot of folks who work in all aspects of the health care profession, including front-line service providers, doctors, and their staff, generally haven't been allowed the luxury of time to stop and upskill in conflict resolution," says Birke. "There's also perhaps a kind of Dunning-Kruger effect, where

people think, 'well, I learned to negotiate with my siblings, I learned to negotiate with my parents, [and] I negotiate with my kids, so I have conflict resolution skills.' "

The Dunning-Kruger effect is a term from academic psychology that describes a cognitive bias in which people overestimate their knowledge or ability in a specific area.[5]

In modern health systems, Birke believes conflict resolution skills are also relevant across a wider spectrum of operations than in years past. Gone are the days when conflict management might have centered primarily on the physician-patient relationship. "These are skills that involve mediating between colleagues everywhere in conflict, negotiating with team members, and negotiating between departments and for resources," says Birke. "We have remote workforces as well, so there are also some tensions there. I would say that medical professionals—and I'd say this broadly to include not just service providers but [also] the people who help around the organizations—would be well-served by either more training or partnering with conflict resolution professionals."

Further, the body of knowledge informing conflict resolution studies continues to expand. "As someone who has been out of law school for 40 years and working in conflict resolution for 35 years, my reading list is growing longer than ever," says Birke, who is also senior vice president and executive director of the JAMS Institute.

Resources

Best Conflict Solutions

https://www.bestconflictsolutions.com

Cairn Consulting Solutions

https://cairncs.com

JAMS Pathways

https://www.jamspathways.com

Agree to Disagree

Like other experts, Birke also reminds us that productive workplace relationships do not have to be calm and harmonious at all times. He suggests thinking of the historical example of President Lincoln's famous cabinet comprised of former political foes who worked to save the Union during the Civil War. In fact, the clash of opinions, differing perspectives, and tensions and disagreements that erupt at times may actually drive creative problem-solving.

"Sometimes different people with different approaches in a healthy dialogue can result in more thorough conversations and more creative outcomes," notes Birke. "If people disagree about how to approach a problem they share—whether that is a patient diagnosis and treatment or how to deal with something like a collective bargaining agreement—if they're collaborating and having disagreements about how to approach these issues, those conversations can sometimes be heated. People can feel strongly about their viewpoint and their approach, but as long as they can disagree without being disagreeable, that kind of conflict is productive."

Of course, disagreements can become disagreeable. "For whatever reasons, relationship conflict [can occur] because a past conflict has either not been managed effectively or because it's become personal, and often there are a wide variety of ways that things become personal, [which] can then result in hard feelings," remarks Birke. "This can lead to diminution in psychological safety, workplace unrest, lowered morale, and a reluctance to participate fully."

For example, Birke describes a workplace that experienced conflict because of a particular individual in a position of authority. "When that person was stressed, they would sometimes take things out on subordinates in a semi-public setting in front of other colleagues," he reports. "There were ripples that occurred from that where people didn't want to communicate with this individual. People also started [forming] camps. Generally, in conflicts, we see people who support one side, people who support the other, and people who want to be neutral and do their job. When you have a medical organization splitting into groups, what you see again is more sick days, less communication, stress, higher turnover, and lowered morale, all of which negatively impact patient outcomes."

For practice managers, a people-oriented leadership approach can go a long way toward creating a more cooperative, high-functioning work culture. "If leadership can lead also as peers," says Birke, "if they can learn to separate out past conflict and relationship conflict and learn to manage past conflict effectively, like how to run a good meeting, how to think in terms of effective brainstorming, how to take input and just manage that dialogue in a constructive way, that side of conflict is terrific. Otherwise, the alternative is groupthink and false consensus, and that results in impoverished conversations and diminished outcomes."

A Unique Challenge

With a background as a physical therapist in hospital acute care settings, Amy Lafko, MSPT, MBA, founder of Cairn Consulting Solutions, is particularly aware of the impact and dynamics of conflict in health systems.

As a business consultant, Lafko remarks that in other industries, executives might joke about how it's not as if they're doing brain surgery. But health care *is* the profession where brain surgery is actually done. The weight of decisions, professionalism, and performance always matters in the high-stakes world of medicine.

"Conflict resolution skills matter so much in health care," says Lafko, author of *People First: A Proven Method for an Exceptional Healthcare Practice*. "In health care, we're dealing with high-stress, often difficult environments. Patients come in because they're concerned about their health or are already having a problem. That's the unfortunate reality of health care. They're already often under stress and strain, and we're in systems that are under stress and strain. When we either brush conflict under the table, ignore it, or resolve it poorly, that can create an even more stressful environment."

As Lafko observes, when the health care environment is layered with conflict, which at times involves life-and-death medical

issues, it can be harder for people to have good self-regulation of their emotions all the time. "This is why it's so important that we raise those concerns in a productive way," she says.

Like other industry experts, Lafko also agrees that conflict management is not about viewing all conflict as negative. "Conflict can be beneficial," says Lafko. "It's when we have unproductive conflict that it's a problem. It's like two ends of a pendulum swing: On one end, there is a conflict, but people are avoiding it, and that's very unproductive because the underlying issues don't get resolved. Or people have conflict and blow up instead of having a conversation, and that blow-up leads to hurt feelings, leads to people shutting down, and decreases psychological safety in the practice. When you've got one of those extremes, either we don't talk about conflict, or we shout out our conflict. Neither one of those [is] helpful to our practice."

Notably, conflict management is not just a leadership concern. "We want our frontline staff to be able to have productive, healthy conflict as well," emphasizes Lafko. "I love this idea of being conflict competent, which involves a couple different pieces. No. 1 is self-awareness and self-regulation. You should know when you're in conflict, even if it's just in your own head. Be aware that something is problematic and then know how to regulate it. Now, I'm not perfect at this; none of us are. We might have a day where we're frustrated by something and that leaks out to the rest of the group. One of the conflict competencies we should have is the ability to state what our issues are objectively. It's not just about 'you as a person did this to me,' but what are the objective issues, and can we separate the objective data from our feelings?"

Lafko spends a lot of time helping practice leaders separate the objective data from feelings or assumptions. "For instance, think about when someone is late for work," she says. "Are you frustrated that they're late for work because this is someone who has been frustrating you in other ways, or is it just because a person was late to work? That takes us to a second, [vital] conflict competency: being able to let go of our assumptions. We all [make] a lot of assumptions about others. We might assume that everyone is stressed for the same reasons we are or is in a similar life situation. And then third is knowing how to not only bring up your concerns in a productive way, but to listen to the other person so we can find that middle ground.

Lafko cites an illustrative example to make her point: "For instance, when I ran urgent care operations, one of my practice managers once said, 'We're going have to let someone go; she's been late to her shift.' I asked if this involved the position where we had changed the operating hours. She said, 'Yes, and now this person is late all the time.' The practice manager's assumption was [that] this employee just didn't want to come in 15 minutes earlier. In response, I suggested we have a conversation with the employee first. When we sat down and talked, we discovered the employee was late was because, with the new hours, she was not able to drop her child off at school in time. Where she lived did not have school buses, so there was no other way to get her child there but to drop her off herself. We asked her, 'Well, what if we moved you to a different location in our system that's closer to the school and also has different operating hours?' She replied that she could make that work. And so now we didn't have to lose a really good employee."

For Lafko, this situation also raised another concern: "My question then became what got in the way of this employee coming to us with that information? A practice manager's job is to create an environment where, if there are issues, people can confidently and safely bring them to the manager. I realized that was an issue we also needed to work on."

Finally, managers should stay alert for early or emerging signs of conflict in the practice. "The first thing for the practice manager is to be willing to acknowledge that something is happening," says Lafko. "Maybe we're having subtle disagreement or noticing passive-aggressive behavior. Maybe we're hearing more concerns and issues from people, or there just seem to be some underlying issues happening. The skill then becomes: How do we sort this out? And can we do something about it?"

The Team Approach

Undoubtedly, every member of the health care team has an essential role in creating a healthy, cooperative workplace culture. The medical assistant can play a pivotal role as a workplace influencer, experts acknowledge.

"When you have a medical assistant who is skilled at understanding how to set the visit up so that the patient feels safe [and] who is skilled at recognizing the stressors the patient is feeling, that can change the whole trajectory of the visit," observes Lafko. "When we dismiss the medical assistant's role in the process, we're not helping the patient. I also want to say my bigger message for health care leaders is to help their physicians learn how

> "I believe the leadership has to model the behavior they wish to inculcate in the organization. That means they need to be available, non-defensive, and [reward] people who offer critiques they don't want to hear but [that] are valid. If you come to me and say something that's a critique of me or the organization and I shut you down, well, you're not coming back. And other people are going to see that. [Instead, I may] say, 'That was hard to hear; thank you for having the courage to come to me' [or,] at a meeting, 'This idea was brought to me; it was hard for me to hear, but I'm really grateful. I'm making the following changes, and we are going to get into a dialogue about X, Y, Z.' Now, all of a sudden, people feel like they can contribute. That's hard to do. But I think everybody in a position of leadership, when they hear a critique, needs to be able to step back and say maybe there's some validity to it. Rather than being defensive, I should model the kind of behavior that I want other people in my organization to aspire to."
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> —Richard Birke

> "I think the most important thing to understand is that conflict resolution is a skill and we can all develop it, and that's hugely important. You can become really successful at resolving all types of conflict with some understanding of the process, some reflection on your own assumptions, and skills and strategies [for] how to have the conversation. I want people to recognize that whether you're that person ... who gets angry and blows up or you're that person who does everything they can to avoid conflict, you can develop a skillset to become someone who can have productive conflict conversations."
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> —Amy Lafko, MSPT, MBA

to have productive conflict with the rest of the team and not just rely on position or authority. There is still such a sense of hierarchy in the health system. I want to have leaders who know how to create a safe space for staff to raise their concerns."

"I believe the medical assistant is such a vital role in health care," agrees Michelle Potter, CMA (AAMA), who works in the vascular and vein surgery department at Providence Medical Group in Everett, Washington. "We set the tone in the room sometimes. What I mean is that we can either let the patient vent out their concerns first, so when the provider arrives, they can get down to business, or we can listen and ease their way. Either way, the way I have always done my job, the patient always comes first."

When a patient is upset or in conflict over issues concerning their health care, Potter's advice is straightforward. "Listen; really listen," she says. "Treat them as you would want to be treated by a staff member or caregiver. Real life can be messy and hard for anyone. Take a moment to read the room, listen to the patient's needs, and be honest with them. If you do not know an answer, tell them, but also try [to] find one and [be] willing to do so. And also follow through with that patient."

Potter shares concerns about current staff shortages and other system pressures fueling more workplace strain and conflict. "In my experience, communication and having patience with each other would go a long way to avoid conflict," she suggests. "Listening to the needs of others may also be very helpful. Also, don't be so put off by someone's response. If you don't agree or feel it was unnecessary, then take a minute and do a peer-to-peer check-up. Often, if someone snaps at you, they may not realize it, and most likely it was not intentional. Be kinder to each other and ourselves; we are all human and deal with stressors differently."

Check the Blame Game

In a sense, the underlying challenge of conflict management is to recognize and honor the humanity of others while working together to achieve shared goals.

"With medical assistants, I recognize that they carry a lot on the job," observes Best. "On an individual level, we know everybody has challenges, but I would encourage all of us to try to have generous assumptions about others. We're right now in a bit of a culture of blame. My advice is to check the blame; check the story you're telling yourself about someone else. Ask questions. Maybe that story I'm telling myself about why someone looked at me a certain way is that they don't like me. But it might be the other person really was thinking about their uncle who was dying. It had nothing to do with you. I would try to check those assumptions and live more in the space of curiosity."

Generosity toward others also translates into showing kindness toward yourself, adds Best: "I would also say be good to yourself. Most of the time we're harder on ourselves than we are on other people. And we leak that onto other people. So, practice gratitude; go in with gratitude. For every problem we see, we should also try to offer a solution. It's easy to be critical or to criticize, but in the absence of a solution, without offering something that might fix it, we're just tearing something down without rebuilding it."

This is an insightful perspective. The challenge of conflict management—the ability to resolve issues productively—is, at heart, largely a matter of cultivating awareness, not only of ourselves as individuals and professionals but also of the broader dynamics of our workplace interactions and relationships. This self-awareness translates into emotional intelligence, active listening skills, and the capacity to treat others with insight, generosity, and empathy.

A health care professional skilled in this awareness views workplace tensions or issues through a more objective lens, works amicably and collaboratively with others, and derives satisfaction from a job well done. This ability also ensures more consistent delivery of quality patient care. ✦

The CE test for this article can be found on page 24.



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