

Dealing with conflict

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Communication is at the heart of both conflict and conflict resolution. Open and timely communication may prevent conflict or help with the management or resolution of an existing conflict situation. Resolution of conflict should be a high priority for all involved.

What is conflict?

Conflict can be defined as a disagreement between people that may cause harm. Conflict arises when people care about an outcome and there is a difference of opinion, values or goals. Conflict is a normal and common part of working within the healthcare environment.

It is important to appreciate that conflicts are not always bad, and when managed correctly, they may bring new ideas and opportunities, and improve patient care outcomes.

Factors that contribute to conflict

Many factors may contribute to conflict. Often the people involved in the conflict do not recognise all of the contributing factors because they focus on issues that are of most importance to them.

These factors could be:

- **Needs:** 'I have responsibilities to the patient which need to be met;', 'I need this to do this;', 'I don't want my position on the training program to be impacted.'
- **History:** 'I have never been adequately acknowledged for my contribution.'
- **Relationship:** 'This colleague has never respected me;', 'My supervisor never listens to me.'
- **Emotions:** 'No one values me or my expertise.'
- **Structures:** 'The system does not support me to do my job anyway.'
- **Communication:** 'Why did no one speak to me about this?'

Ways of dealing with conflict

Most of us use one of five recognised strategies when dealing with conflict: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise or collaboration. The first three behaviours often produce results that are unhelpful and unsatisfactory.

Developing the skills to enable us to use compromise and collaboration in dealing with conflict is the most beneficial approach. This allows us to listen, understand and validate the viewpoints of others with the goal of providing for patient needs.

Finding common ground can sometimes be difficult despite our best efforts. Here are some tips to assist you:

- Try to understand the situation and the points of view of others involved.
- Know and seek to improve your own communication skills and response to conflict.
- Recognise that people have different communication styles and responses to conflict.
- If you are unsure about how to deal with the conflict, speak with your manager to try and identify the best way to manage the situation.
- Adopt an **AVID** approach:

Assume the positive about others and their behaviour.

Validate the situation: If you cannot assume the positive, talk to the person and find out what is going on. Seek to understand by talking directly to the other person. When you speak with the person, do so in a confidential manner. Use phrases such as 'I feel' to present your view. Always be respectful towards others. Do not lay blame.

Ignore some battles: If you cannot assume the positive or are unable (unwilling) to validate the unknown by talking to the person, you must ignore the unchangeable. Sometimes you can't talk to a person or you may not want to take the risk of speaking to that person. In these situations, you must consciously decide to let the matter go. However, there is a caveat: if you choose to ignore a situation and this situation repeats itself over and over, at some point you must decide to take action and validate the situation.

Do something to de-stress: If you cannot use some of the strategies above, do something productive. If you do not, the stress of an unresolved situation will build up and be detrimental to your health. What you can do is:

- Debrief the situation with a trusted friend or mentor, use an employee assistance program or speak with a counsellor. Avant offers a confidential Personal Support Program for its members.
- Introduce relaxing activities and techniques into your lifestyle such as walking, yoga and running.
- Consider meditation as a way of becoming more self-aware and positively focused.

The role of emotion in conflict

Unresolved emotion and moral distress are critical contributors to the development and exacerbation of conflict. Moral distress occurs when doctors think they know the ethically appropriate action to take but are unable to carry it out for various reasons. There are frequently different views within the healthcare team – as well as with patients – based on differing values and beliefs about what is the ‘right’ thing to do, and this can lead to conflict. Improved communication between health professionals facilitates collaboration and positive management of these situations.

By understanding various factors that contribute to the conflict and which are important to us, we can recognise them and begin to work towards a resolution. This allows us to understand our own reactions, which may explain why we might become upset, frustrated or angry.

Sometimes within the healthcare environment there can be a power imbalance between individuals who have a difference of opinion. This can occur when a junior member of the team finds it difficult to address an issue with someone who is more senior. Sometimes this imbalance can affect our ability to recognise factors contributing to the conflict and identify a strategy to manage it.

Outside help

If the conflict cannot be resolved, then you may consider seeking help from your medical defence organisation. Avant offers a telephone advice service for its members. Members may also be entitled to legal advice and assistance.

There are also dispute resolution services, resources and policies available from the Australian Medical Association and Department of Health in each state.

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