

# Managing conflict in your practice

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## Abstract

Conflict exists in every workplace. We might ignore it, or cover it up, or avoid it, but it will still exist. Conflict is not inherently bad for an organization. Dynamic, trusting organizations can have productive conflict as people constantly seek ways to improve. On the other hand, poorly managed and unresolved conflict can be highly destructive. This presentation discusses recognition of conflict, and strategies to successfully manage them.

**Key words:** practice management, human resources, conflict management

## Résumé

Des conflits surviennent dans tous les milieux de travail. On peut les ignorer, les cacher ou les éviter mais ils existent toujours. Les conflits ne sont pas nécessairement mauvais en soi pour une organisation. Des organisations dynamiques et confiantes peuvent avoir des conflits productifs quand les gens recherchent toujours de nouvelles façons de s'améliorer. D'un autre côté, les conflits mal gérés et non-résolus peuvent avoir un effet très destructeur. Cette présentation discute comment reconnaître les conflits et les stratégies pour mieux les gérer.

## The Nature of Conflict

Conflict can be productive when it is focused on issues and not personalities. For example, 2 partners disagree on a potential business investment idea but they have a great deal of trust and respect for each other, so they do their homework, gather more data, solicit outside input, and come up with a new and better idea that they both can support. Contrast that with unproductive, personality-based conflict, which is usually destructive. Same scenario with 2 partners who disagree, but in this case they don't have a good relationship; 1 partner gripes to his spouse and co-workers about how the other partner is just "stuck in his ways and unwilling to change." Over time the partners' relationship just gets worse, the other employees are disillusioned, the business suffers, and eventually breaks up.

## Managing Conflict

Managers often avoid conflict out of a misguided belief that it might resolve on its own. In fact, conflicts rarely resolve without active intervention. Open conflict is stressful

for most people so they may push it under the surface for a while, but if the source of the conflict remains it will surely surface again. At some point everyone has experienced a mild-mannered person who avoided conflict and put up with things for a long time until one day the dam broke, and others were astonished at their sudden transformation into a raging monster with a long list of grievances. Raging outbursts are the result of poor conflict management and they can result in emotional scars and ruined relationships that may never be repaired. The negative implications of conflict avoidance for organizations such as veterinary practices are clear.

Managers ought to run toward conflict, not away from it. Sharp managers will constantly monitor their own relationships and that of others for the early warning signs of conflict: the sarcastic comment, the whispered or abruptly cut off conversation, sudden reluctance to help a co-worker. Trust your social instincts and quickly follow up on these signs; after all, employees often send the signals in the hope that the manager will "do something." Begin with a quiet, one-on-one conversation with each of the individuals you think might be experiencing conflict, open up the conversation by relating what you have observed and asking for their response. Very often the conflict will turn out to be a simple misunderstanding among the parties involved and a good, open conversation will quickly resolve it.

Management's willingness to recognize conflict and deal with it directly is a strong step toward establishing a culture of healthy conflict management in your practice. Recognizing that conflict is inevitable, managers should proactively set expectations with employees about dealing with it. Establish ground rules for conflict such as:

1. Conflict is acceptable, but it must be productive.
2. Keep it about work-related behaviors and results, not about personalities.
3. Talk with the other person first, not with co-workers and the supervisor.
4. Start with respect, actively seek to listen and understand.
5. Look for shared interests and move forward. 100% agreement is not always needed.
6. Seek the best interests of every person involved and the organization.
7. When a decision is made, everyone gets on board.

## Mutual Gains Negotiation

The Harvard University Program on Negotiation developed a method of dealing with conflict productively that is documented in the book *Getting to Yes*.<sup>1</sup> The first principle they

drive home in the book is “don’t argue over positions.” Think about that: we often enter a discussion/negotiation/argument with a pre-set position. We state our position and prepare to defend it against all opponents. We listen to the other person’s ideas, perhaps to understand but also to find weaknesses in their position. Both parties take shots at the other’s position while digging in deeper on our own. The approach limits creativity and simply encourages reinforcing each side’s original positions. It also ties an individual’s personality to a position and makes people think about “saving face.” In other words, people become more interested in winning or losing the conflict and how they appear in that process than in solving the conflict in a way that is best for the organization or for all of the other parties involved. *Getting to Yes* provides a wholly different approach to conflict resolution called “mutual gains negotiation.” Their approach has been successfully used to resolve conflicts large and small around the world. Following are the 4 core concepts in mutual gains negotiation.

### **One: Separate the People from the Problem**

People in conflict, especially within an organization, have interests both in the substance of the conflict and in their ongoing relationship with the other party. Likely, they will continue working together so they share an interest in not ruining their relationship. The first step in mutual gains negotiation is to separate the people from the problem. If an older partner in a business is not in favor of a risky, new investment, is it because they are “stubborn” and “set in their ways,” or because their interests as an investor near retirement do not match well with large, new financial risks? The first characterization comes across as a personal attack on their character, the second description seems more like a problem that can be described and possibly resolved.

People in conflict will experience emotions, that’s a fact that cannot be changed. Nobody can “check their emotions at the door,” or totally separate their rational thought from their emotional experience. Emotions are legitimate, they must be acknowledged and dealt with. We normally experience emotions because some factor, whether real or perceived, in our environment is causing the emotional response. People vary in their “emotional intelligence,” their ability to understand, process, and deal effectively with emotions that they experience and that they perceive from others. Emotional intelligence can be developed through productive engagement to better understand others and learning techniques such as mutual gains negotiation.

Of course, a big part of managing conflict successfully is communicating more effectively. Significant conversations are best when held in person so that good back and forth discussion and clarification can take place. Email and text messages are notorious for not delivering meaningful context and nuance, thereby making messages seem too harsh and needlessly escalating a conflict. It’s also best to schedule time for important conversations that can be free of distractions.

### **Two: Focus on Interests, Not Positions**

People in conflict sometimes seem to have irreconcilable positions, but in reality there are often many underlying interests that can be discussed and agreed upon. The key is to find and focus on those underlying interests. Let’s consider our earlier example of 2 business partners, 1 near retirement and 1 early in her career, who are considering a major business investment. The younger partner feels the need to reinvest in order to support business growth and future needs, while the older partner wants to protect his equity in the business. Their positions may seem incompatible but let us consider the interests that they share. They both want to see the business remain profitable and growing into the future, she wants to continue her career, he wants to sell his interest in a viable business that can continue making payments to him. They both are interested in providing high-quality services that their clients need. They clearly share interests in positioning the business to years of future profitability, and starting with those shared interests they can have a more productive discussion.

### **Three: Invent Options for Mutual Gain**

Adopting the first 2 concepts, separating the people from the problem and focusing on interests not positions, can change the whole dynamic of a conflict. Sometimes it takes the parties from being adversaries arguing from opposite sides of the table to collaborators on the same side working together to solve the problem. The third step, invent options for mutual gain, requires the parties to think creatively to invent new and creative options. Facilitation tools like brainstorming can be helpful in this process to promote creativity. Come up with a lot of ideas, some wild and some realistic. Often the wild ideas are helpful to open up whole new ways of thinking about the problem.

Let’s go back to our example business partners. They agree about their shared interests in a viable business for the future and that reinvestment is needed to achieve that. They bring in their lender and another business advisor to help them discuss the problem. Thinking creatively, the group comes up with several changes that could be made at very low cost to enhance customer service and increase profitability. They also come up with a plan for staging investments in the facility over time rather than all at once. This strategy conserves cash in the business and limits the risk of too much debt.

### **Four: Insist on Using Objective Criteria**

The fourth concept of mutual gains negotiation is to insist on using objective criteria. Conflict that is focused on personalities and on reinforcing positions typically throws out any ideas about objectivity. How many times have you heard people in conflict use phrases like “he’s always doing

that” or she “never listens?” Of course, words like “always” and “never” in these situations are rarely true; they are symptomatic of people airing complaints and digging in to their positions.

Instead, the mutual gains approach calls for finding and using objective criteria. Objective criteria are things that can be measured and ideally compared against other established standards. In our running example of the business partners, they can use industry benchmarks to compare their business against other similar businesses. In other situations we might need to invent items to measure and manage. Suppose 2 staff are in conflict because one often needs to leave work early for family events leaving the other to work extra hours finishing up. They might resolve this situation by developing a system to track flexible hours and by creating a system to pre-stage the end-of-day work to make it less burdensome on the one left behind. In either case, a set of objective criteria can be measured and managed by the parties over time, and corrections made without resorting to destructive, positional conflict.

## Summary

The pace of life at work leaves less and less time for building strong, trusting relationships. Frequently this leads to frustration and conflict among people. Managers can equip employees with more productive interpersonal and business skills by setting expectations about conflict and coaching a mutual gains approach to conflict management. The result will be better team relationships, better solutions to conflict, and ultimately better business results.

## Reference

1. Fisher R, Ury W, Patton B. *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991.