

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN HEALTHCARE SETTINGS: STAFF CONFLICTS

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Question

What is the best available evidence regarding conflict resolution in healthcare settings with regards to staff conflicts?

Clinical Bottom Line

Conflict is an inevitable reality in healthcare organizations.¹ Traditionally, workplace conflict was viewed entirely as a negative aspect of organizational life, as “draining energy, reducing focus, and causing discomfort and hostility”.^{1, p.22} Conflict was defined in negative terms as “processes occurring within a group in any of several forms, such as hostility, decreased communications, distrust, sabotage, verbal abuse, and coercive tactics”.^{1, p.22} However, conflict may be defined in more positive terms as “discord that results from differences in ideas, values, or feelings between two or more people”.^{1, p.22}

- A literature review suggests that conflict should be defined in a positive and comprehensive way that facilitates constructive resolution. It is possible for healthcare professionals to engage in conflict assertively and respectfully as a means for personal and organizational growth and innovation in practice. Review authors recommend that healthcare professionals should have access to educational opportunities around conflict resolution and, also understand the differences between acceptable assertive behavior and unacceptable behavior such as violence or bullying in the workplace.¹ (Level 5)
- A “Conflict Management Checklist” was proposed by experts as a “diagnostic tool” for the assessment of conflicts in healthcare organizations. The aspects considered are:^{1, p.35} (Level 5)
 - The conflict situation should be defined (the issue; the persons involved; other relevant parties; the history of the conflict)
 - Identification of organizational factors (working conditions; policies)
 - Identification of personal factors (personal issues; beliefs and feelings; usual anger management approach)
 - Self-reflection (use of questions such as “How does my behavior contribute to the dynamics of the conflict?”, and “what elements of the situation I am able and willing to change?”)
 - Clarification of steps for conflict resolution (such as acknowledge feelings and define the situation in positive terms as a problem that needs a solution).
 - An expert opinion suggests that while conflict within healthcare teams is inevitable, effective conflict resolution and management relies on transparent communication, listening and understanding the perceived focus of the disagreement. It is recommended that the seven C’s are avoided when approaching conflict including: commanding, comparing, condemning, challenging, condescending, contradicting and confusing.² (Level 5)
- An expert opinion article suggests ways to construct a conflict resolution program within a healthcare organization. The author suggests that education is key to successful conflict resolution. Conflict resolution curriculum should include fundamental elements of conflict and conflict as a normative part of inter-human communication and interaction; elements of dynamic conflict; elements of the conflict resolution process (in stages); organization specific processes and procedures (including access). Conflict resolution models are important and should address both structural and process issues associated with conflict resolution. The conflict resolution program must be supported by all levels of the healthcare system and be available to all staff regardless of position or shift to be successful.³ (Level 5)
- Expert opinion suggests that the steps of conflict resolution should include a welcome and introduction, explanation of the process and identification of confidentiality issues. Then participants should be given the opportunity to describe their situation, identifying the main concerns, solution seeking by participants, and a then an evaluation of selection of solution for resolution. The process and agreed solutions should be documented, solutions should be numbered and include individual commitment to actions including follow-up. The mediation process should also be evaluated by the organization.³ (Level 5)
- Conflict management styles adopted by healthcare professionals (competing; collaborating; compromising; avoiding; accommodating) were explored in healthcare organizations by using an instrument known as Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument that requires respondents to choose behaviors most characteristic of their response to conflict.^{4,5}
- There are other instruments available with known validity that may be used in conflict management programs, such as the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling, and the Conflict Communication Scale.⁶ (Level 4)

- A pilot randomized controlled trial (RCT) investigated a “Hot Seat” training model targeted at clinicians’ conflict resolution skills. The “Hot Seat” model includes two scenarios using actual patient care examples of interprofessional conflicts, where participants’ dialogue is facilitated by trainers, actors and the audience. The pilot study found that the “Hot Seat” scenario based training model improved participants conflict resolution skills when compared to controls.⁷ (Level 1)

Characteristics of the Evidence

This summary is based on a structured search of the literature and selected evidence-based health care databases. Evidence in this summary is from:

- Literature reviews including expert opinion.¹⁻³
- Surveys that explored conflict management styles adopted by healthcare professionals in diverse healthcare settings.^{4,5}
- A study that measured the validity of the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling instrument.⁶
- A pilot RCT that included 60 clinicians from local hospitals.⁷

Best Practice Recommendations

- It is recommended that all staff receive initial and ongoing conflict resolution education including fundamental elements about conflicts and conflict resolution. (Grade B)
- Healthcare organizations should have clear policies and procedures regarding conflict resolution within the local setting. (Grade B)
- It is recommended that each healthcare organization design and implement a conflict resolution program tailored to its specific characteristics. (Grade B)
- When conflict occurs, a formal process for remediation that includes assessment, solution seeking, and evaluation of solution/s may be undertaken. The agreed solutions should be documented and followed up and evaluated by the organization. The use of conflict resolution tools (e.g. Conflict Management Checklist, Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode, Conflict Communication Scale) may assist in this process. (Grade B)

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For details on the method for development see Munn Z, Lockwood C, Moola S. The development and use of evidence summaries for point of care information systems: A streamlined rapid review approach. *Worldviews Evid Based Nurs.* 2015;12(3):131-8.

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