Conflict Management in the Health Care Workplace

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In this article...

Recognition of conflict between health care team members and utilization of conflict management strategies is important to ameliorate conflict situations and minimize their potential impact on the workplace as well as patient care.

Conflict begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to affect negatively, something that the first party cares about.[1] Conflict can occur in any setting where two or more people work together.

The initial personal response to a disagreement manifests as an emotional reaction, while conflict behavior is the action that is initiated by an individual in order to express emotion or interfere with another individual's needs.[2]

Interests are the needs that motivate people's actions. There are three themes that are common to most definitions of conflict:

1. Perceived incompatibility of interests
2. Some interdependence of the parties
3. Some form of interaction[3]

Conflict in the health care setting may not only impact the productivity and morale of the disagreeing individuals (e.g., physicians, nurses, technicians, administrative staff members),[4] but also negatively affect patients and their family members if they interact with a demoralized or disenfranchised team member.

As a result, it is imperative for health care professionals to identify and manage conflict when it arises in order to ameliorate its potential impact on patient care and safety.

Sources of conflict

Conflict commonly implies fight, struggle or battle; however, conflict in the workplace occurs along a continuum of low-intensity minor disagreements to high-intensity sabotage, litigation and all-out war. In addition to stratification by intensity, workplace conflict can also be categorized according to the duration (acute, sub-acute, chronic and interminable).[5]

Conflict often also involves an emotional dimension that signals a disagreement with another party. The emotions may be fear, sadness, bitterness, anger, hopelessness or some combination. Thus, conflict can occur along various dimensions that often result in a non linear dynamic with parties who are in conflict behaving and reacting in different, seemingly irrational ways.[6]

Bernard Mayer described five major sources of conflict:

1. Communication
2. Emotions
3. Values
4. Structure
5. History

Communication failures can occur due to imperfections with the sending or receiving of a message, particularly one that concerns complex or emotional matters; this includes language barriers. Emotions such as anger or jealousy can both instigate and add intensity to a conflict.

Values (i.e., moral and ethical beliefs) guide one's decisions and actions; should values differ between individuals, conflicts may arise. Structure consists of the elements in the external framework constituting an issue, such as individual experiences, the physical work environment and resources involved.

Conflicts resulting from structure issues include examples such as disputes over resources due to overutilization

by one group, or limited workspace for too many coworkers. History in the context of the health care workplace refers to the background of the individuals participating in the conflict as well as the environment. For example, a senior administrative assistant may balk at his boss insisting that he assume menial filing duties when that role has been traditionally handled by new hires.

Other causes of conflict exist. Disparate, desired goals for both individuals and organizations may bring parties into conflict. One example is a young attending physician desiring an incentive-based compensation plan for overnight call whereas senior attending physicians might prefer a system with less call for senior members and no incentive-based compensation.

The effects of conflict commonly extend beyond the parties involved and affect others in the workplace. When poorly managed, conflict can have an adverse impact on other workers or patients when productivity and attentiveness to tasks is diminished. Conversely, well-managed conflict can actually have a positive benefit when workers realize that there are systems in place to properly handle disputes and conflicts.

Conflict management styles

Conflict management consists of the use of strategies and tactics to move all disagreeing parties toward resolution, or at least containment of the dispute. There are five fundamental approaches to conflict management:

1. Competition
2. Avoidance
3. Compromise
4. Accommodation
5. Collaboration

Competition entails using whatever power is available to pursue one's own concerns at some other person's expense. Although this style is assertive and uncooperative, its use may be appropriate in order to stand up for one's rights, defend a position that is believed to be correct, or when the other party refuses to take anything other than a competitive approach.[7]

Avoidance occurs when one does not pursue or address one's own concerns or those of the other party in

Table 1

Procedural steps for a typical negotiation process.

1. Identify and define the problem.
2. Get the facts (not the assumptions).
3. Generate possible solutions without criticism.
4. Evaluate possible solutions using logic and mature judgment.
5. Select solutions. A combination may be preferable.
6. Implement the solution(s) with clearly defined roles for both parties.
7. Evaluate the results.

the conflict. Avoidance is unassertive and uncooperative, and may involve sidestepping issues or withdrawing for a cool-down period before resuming conflict. Repeated avoidance may result in loss of self-esteem and confidence.

Compromise involves a trade-off for the conflicting parties, with the result being an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both. Concessions may be exchanged or both parties may agree to a middle-ground position.

Accommodation consists of deferring one's personal interests to satisfy the concerns of the other person. This style is unassertive yet cooperative, and may be exhibited in the form of selfless charity, yielding to another's point of view, or to settle minor conflicts when a major conflict is anticipated.

Collaboration is the attempt by conflicting parties to work together to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both. Collaboration requires a commitment of time and interpersonal energy, yet it is a key strategy for many major conflicts in health care because it builds understanding of complex issues and interdependent systems.

Conflict management in health care

Health care workers face recurrent conflicts with demanding physicians, feuding co-workers, disgruntled patients, over-extended nurses and many other people. The health care setting is usually defined by a hierarchical structure, and disputes can occur with peers, supervisees or authority figures.

Furthermore, the health care workplace is often hectic and requires staff members and care providers to multi task. This setting makes conflict management challenging, and most physicians and other health care providers have little or no training in conflict management. In a busy health care work environment, many individuals may choose to "deal with it" by avoidance rather than expend the resources necessary to collaborate or compromise.

Individuals in the health care profession often employ more than one conflict management style. This is an important skill, as constructive conflict management requires selecting the appropriate style based on the characteristics of the conflict.

Although collaboration is usually the ideal method of conflict management in the health care workplace, compromise also can be an important component. Negotiation is integral to compromise and collaboration, and consists of efforts to manage the give and take between two conflicting parties to either a partially satisfying (i.e., compromising) or fully satisfying (i.e., collaborative) solution. A typical negotiation consists of a series of steps, as outlined in Table 1.[8]

Negotiation in health care workplace conflicts should always be based on substantive issues. Because of the implications of disgruntled or dissatisfied workers on patient care, negotiations in health care should focus on solving problems and satisfying needs, with safe, effective patient care being the ultimate goal.

Objective criteria should be used to discuss issues in a conflict, and one's position in the hierarchy (e.g., attending physician) should not obviate the arguments and interests of subordinates. Indeed, during negotiation, it is essential to recall and appreciate the interdependence of the care providers with administrative and support staff members.[9]

Additional strategies for managing conflict in the health care workplace have been reported in the literature.[10]

1. Slow down. Because health care workers tend to be action-oriented, they may move too quickly to resolve a situation without gathering the appropriate information.
2. Involve only those most closely associated with a conflict when it first arises to ensure that the directly pertinent information is available.
3. If a committee is formed to solve a conflict, clarify the roles and expectations of all committee members to minimize additional conflict.
4. Involve the appropriate parties in decisions affecting their areas of responsibility.

5. Address the issue at the appropriate level. Taking concerns directly "to the top" may escalate a conflict to the point where it becomes more difficult to resolve.
6. Confront the issue if at all possible. In a busy health care setting, avoidance may be the easiest option, but it is rarely the best option.

There can be significant costs involved with a failure to manage conflict appropriately in the health care setting. Direct costs of conflict include: litigation costs; management productivity losses due to conflict resolution rather than performing managerial duties; turnover costs for training new staff to replace disgruntled workers; disability/stress claims; as well as sabotage, theft and damage to facilities by those involved with the conflict.

Indirect costs of conflict include diminished team morale, decreased customer/patient satisfaction, the tarnished reputation of the organization and health care professionals, and emotional costs for those involved in the conflict.[11]

Conclusion

Conflict in the health care workplace can have significant financial and emotional costs that potentially impact not only the employees, but also the patients and the organization as a whole. So it is imperative for conflicts to be recognized early and managed appropriately.

Collaboration and compromise are essential when working in the health care setting, as institutions and departments within an institution comprise myriad interdependent stakeholders, including administrative and support personnel, nurses, technicians, therapists, assistants, physicians, and management.

Strategies for managing conflict in the health care workplace should be reviewed and utilized in order to increase the likelihood of an assertive, cooperative solution to conflicts should they arise.

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