

## **“How do you manage conflict in the workplace?”**

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Conflict can be managed in many ways, but the key is managing it successfully. Recall a conflict that you have seen or been part of this past year as a resident. As a resident or new practitioner, you are the “rookie” or “low man on the totem pole.” Therefore, dealing with conflict in a manner that results in positive outcomes is ideal; nevertheless, dealing with conflict can be intimidating. Many people are more comfortable managing conflict in their personal lives than in their professional lives because of feeling vulnerable or being fearful of repercussions. However, there are tools you can use in both your personal and your professional life to manage conflict in a tempered and thoughtful way.

### What Is Conflict Management?

According to Wikipedia (a less-than-optimal reference), conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of it. The aim of conflict management is to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in organizational settings. What this tells me is that conflict is a good thing if managed correctly. We cannot avoid conflict. In fact, conflict is often the impetus for increasing productivity, creating innovation, and striving toward excellence. Most successes in pharmacy practice were not the product of every contributing person agreeing unanimously, but rather the end product of discussion, disagreement, and resolution.

### Successful Conflict Management

Effectively engaging in conflict can be a learning experience. The operative word here is *effectively*. Strive to resolve conflicts by deploying the appropriate skills. Recognizing opportunities to practice these skills and reflecting on the end results will increase your chances of successfully managing future conflicts. Professionals who lack a solid conflict management skill set may end up avoiding conflict. Indeed, being passive and desiring not to “make a mountain out of a molehill” is tempting. However, when conflict is avoided in this circumstance, it can escalate and cultivate negative thoughts and feelings.

If the conflict culture within your organization is not explicitly explained to you, you should try to determine it. Being aware of the culture and your personal conflict management style will help you avoid the frustration that results when these two clash. Increasing your conflict self-awareness can improve your conflict managing skills and in turn maximize your professional relationships.

### A Conflict Management Scale for Pharmacy

One of the most effective tools I have found is the conflict management scale (CMS), published by Zubin Austin and colleagues from the University of Toronto in 2009.<sup>1</sup> What I particularly like about the CMS is that it was generated through an analysis of data specifically from pharmacists. In fact, I included a CMS exercise in a faculty development session at the University of Colorado during a departmental retreat. The CMS exercise asks you to complete a 19-question inventory of yourself. You answer questions that ask, “When I am involved in a conflict situation with another person....” You must respond honestly. It is very tempting to answer how you would like to respond, but if you do this, you will fall into the *self-deception* trap that Freud has said can lead to defensiveness and blindness to the truth. Ultimately, this will result in more conflict.

After completing the CMS, your highest and second-highest scores will yield your dominant and secondary conflict management styles. Each of the four management conflict styles given in the Austin article falls along two axes: (1) your communication style, either direct or indirect; and (2) your worldwide view, either principled or pragmatic (see Figure 1). Austin et al. define the four conflict management styles as follows:

(1) Imposing

You have a direct style of communication and have strongly held beliefs and principles. You do not believe it is helpful or even necessary to avoid confrontation and instead believe that, when handled effectively and with maturity, conflict produces better results in the end. You sometimes feel frustrated that others might perceive you as a 'bully' but recognize that cannot be helped; instead it is important for you to stick to your principles, articulate them clearly, and convince others of your point of view.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Settling

You have a direct communication style and are pragmatic in your beliefs and principles. While you do not like conflict you recognize that at times it is simply unavoidable. In these circumstances, your goal is to find a way to compromise, give-and-take, and simply reach a solution that is palatable to everyone. As a result, you do not believe there is any benefit to sticking tenaciously to any one perspective and instead believe it is best to listen and understand what others are saying.<sup>1</sup>

(3) Avoiding

You have an indirect communication style and are pragmatic in your beliefs and principles. You believe that, in most cases, conflict can and should be avoided since emotions entangled with issues frequently produces chaos. You have an ability to anticipate conflict and its emotional consequences and recognize it is best (and possible) to prevent it from erupting rather than dealing with it once it has occurred. To this end, you are particularly sensitive to non-verbal communication and are very careful in the words you choose when you speak with others.<sup>1</sup>

(4) Thwarting

You have an indirect communication style and have strongly held beliefs and principles. You believe that group cohesion and interpersonal connections are important and work hard to ensure that, in spite of a disagreement, people still get along with one another. You pride yourself on your ability to communicate effectively with different types of people and do not like to have emotion interfere with rational discussion of issues, even if (at times) you do become emotional during a conflict situation.<sup>1</sup>

No conflict management style is superior to another. Moreover, your conflict management style can fluctuate, depending on whether you use your dominant style or your secondary style.

Successful use of the CMS will increase your self-awareness. It will also help you identify conflict management styles in others in an attempt to work effectively with them, despite occasional conflict. Consider the common reasons you have conflict in your day-to-day experiences, and explore which tactics are effective in de-escalating emotions and which are most effective in managing conflict. In so doing, you may practice different strategies; reflect on which strategies work better than others. Try this and see if it is helpful.

**Reference**

1. Austin Z, Gregory PA, Martin C. A conflict management scale for pharmacy. Am J Pharm Educ 2009;73:Article 122.

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