¹McDaniel G., ²Dernakovski M. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HEALTHCARE

¹Franklin University, Columbus, USA ²Coaching Center, Minsk, Belarus

This work is devoted to the topic of eliminating unproductive conflict in the organization of healthcare.

Keywords: healthcare, conflict, management.

МакДэниел Г., Дернаковский М. УПРАВЛЕНИЕ КОНФЛИКТАМИ В ЗДРАВООХРАНЕНИИ

Университет Франклина, Колумбус, США Коучинг Центр, Минск, Беларусь

Работа посвящена теме устранения непродуктивного конфликта при организации здравоохранения.

Ключевые слова: здравоохранение, конфликт, менеджмент.

Employees, managers and administrators in healthcare organizations live and work in a time of increasing pressure and a relentless challenge at home and work to do more, with less, and to do so better and faster. Demands for high quality care, cost control, competition for jobs and public scrutiny is fierce. Professionals in healthcare organizations often find themselves rushing through life on very little sleep, too much coffee, and under extraordinary pressure to be the perfect employee, parent, friend, and associate. As Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz observe in *The Power of Full Engagement*, "We use words like obsessed, crazed and overwhelmed not to describe insanity, but instead to characterize our daily lives." Does this sound a little like your typical day at work?

Is it any wonder that under these trying conditions healthcare professionals face increasing levels of stress and conflict at home, work, and in their personal life? Simply put, unproductive conflict causes unnecessary stress on personal well-being and life balance, as well as eating away at the health, quality of care, and prosperity of healthcare organizations.

Leadership and conflict. Let us begin by stating that we firmly believe that it is leadership's responsibility to address unproductive conflict in a healthcare organization. However, we also believe that in today's highly educated, experienced healthcare environment, everyone in an organization is a leader and everyone is equally responsible for both creating positive conflict and resolving unproductive conflict. Let's take this sentence apart. First, everyone is a leader. Leadership is often seen as a position or a title. Hopefully, the individuals in key senior roles in your healthcare organization with big titles and salaries are also very effective leaders, but today's employees are all keenly aware that titles and big salaries do not mean a person is a good leader. Leaders are those who influence themselves and others to achieve positive outcomes in

an ethical manner. This means anyone in an organization is a leader since all employees have the responsibility for the quality of their own work and to work effectively with others to serve the larger purpose of the organization. Second, leaders create conflict by introducing change. Whether the change is building a new hospital, implementing a new surgical technique, hiring new staff, or introducing a new software system-- change creates conflict. Even when it is a change we desire, people have to stop doing what they were doing and do something new. This always causes conflict. Third, effective leaders don't just create conflict and then walk away, hoping that someone else will deal with the challenges or chaos that occurs. Effective leaders help others to recognize the need for change and work collaboratively with others to work through the conflict that inevitably follows. That means effective leaders do NOT pretend they can't see conflict, avoid conflict or push the responsibility for resolving conflict off on others. Fourth, leaders work with others to achieve positive outcomes that are ethical. This means the outcomes achieved must be good for everyone and in accordance with the positive values, principles, codes of conduct, ethical standards, and laws.

Because leaders introduce change and therefore, conflict, and all employees are leaders, it means that everyone should recognize that conflict and change are a natural part of everyday work. The key is to develop a culture and the skills to trust each other to communicate effectively, problem-solve, and work collaboratively to reach the best outcomes for employees, healthcare professionals, families and patients.

Productive vs. Unproductive conflict. We define *productive conflict* as an open exchange of conflicting ideas in which those involved feel heard, respected, and unafraid to voice their opinions for the purpose of leading to the most effective positive outcome. Productive conflict is valuable to friends, family, co-workers, suppliers, and patients because it builds trust, respect, and make us more productive and creative when interacting with each other. Productive conflict drives successful healthcare organizations forward, leads to creative, innovative ideas and solutions, and it helps enhance relationships by allowing us to confront each other so that we all improve in a constructive way without insults and bruised egos.

Unproductive conflict, on the other hand, can be very destructive. A key characteristic of unproductive conflict is that frequently the real issue behind a conflict or difference of opinion is never really addressed. It may be that one of the individuals involved in a conflict simply does not take the issue seriously, or uses blame or denial to avoid the issue altogether. It may also be to one person who, due to their status or position in the organization, demeans or disrespects others and blocks effective communication and trust. The result of unproductive conflict is that it tears down relationships, creates barriers and silos between us, and feeds on itself to make things even worse. Unproductive conflict is what we all hate about conflict in the first place.

The cost of conflict. When people in healthcare organizations work productively to address and resolve conflict, the payoff is greater trust, higher

morale, a widespread commitment to providing quality care, and enhanced working relationships. On the other hand, the inability to work through conflict causes great stress among employees and management that costs healthcare organizations time, money, and ill-will not only internally, but also with patients, families, suppliers, regulators, and the public.

In a comprehensive study conducted by CCP, Inc., in 2017, researchers estimated that unproductive conflict costs organizations in the United States over \$359 billion dollars a year. In addition, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on conflict management training, team building, and interpersonal skills; *but* these expenditures are not being translated into effective, productive, collaborative work.

Let's look at an all too familiar example from the healthcare profession. In a small, regional hospital, a registered nurse (RN) filed a complaint regarding treatment she received from the head nurse. The RN reported that over a sixmonth period, tensions between her and her supervisor escalated to the point the RN felt she was working in a very unhealthy and hostile environment. The RN claimed that her boss was overly critical, unfair in scheduling, and had publicly ridiculed her on several occasions. As a result, she and her supervisor were not communicating and information regarding patient care was being shared only sporadically. The RN also observed that other staff in the unit felt the same way, but were afraid to say anything for fear of reprisal.

The head nurse responded that she and the RN simply had different work styles and as the head nurse, it was her prerogative to schedule staff as she saw fit and that it was also her responsibility to provide corrective communications if and when she saw something occurring that could impact patient care.

As a result of the conflict, the RN began to take a significant amount of sick time which was attributed to work related stress. Other employees in the unit also spent an unnecessary amount of time discussing the situation with some taking the side of the RN and some the side of the head nurse.

An investigation into the situation identified a number of issues which contributed to the conflict between these two individuals including:

- A lack of communication skills among all unit staff
- No conflict management skills training
- Infrequent or incomplete communication between the head nurse and other staff
 - Unnecessary time spent gossiping by all employees
- Generational differences in how employees perceived criticism of work practices

The bottom line was that due to the conflict they were experiencing, the head nurse, RN and other unit staff were providing poor service to patients and placing the hospital in jeopardy of more mistakes or litigation.

This is clearly an example of how unproductive conflict can exacerbate problems and become a serious impediment to quality care. You have experienced this in your healthcare organization and in hotels, retail stores,

restaurants, gas stations, repair shops, and countless other business and government offices across the country. The result is the same— unproductive conflict gets in the way of the primary reason for the organization's very existence *and* the purpose of the employee's job – serving the customer.

Many people are simply not aware of the impact unproductive conflict can have on the organization, customers and on people. Research indicates that the cost of conflict may fall into one or more of the following categories:

- 1. Direct Costs include litigation expenses for attorney fees, expert witnesses, trial and appeals.
- 2. Productivity Costs include the value of lost time, errors, scrap, and loss of intellectual property, turnover, and retraining.
- 3. Opportunity Costs of what those involved would otherwise have been producing if they were not embroiled in conflict such as failure to capitalize on new ideas, missed sales, poor service that translates into a lost customer, etc.
- 4. Continuity Costs include the loss of existing relationships among one's network, customers, associates, vendors, suppliers, manufacturers, and friends.
- 5. Emotional Costs include the personal turmoil and stress we feel when dealing with situations of conflict.

It should be noted that the impact of these costs is not always immediately apparent. In the example of the RN and head nurse, the impact could have been a medical mistake that leads to litigation. The RN (or other employees) could decide to leave, at which time the organization would have to incur recruiting and training expenses to find a replacement. Because the two individuals were not communicating fully, the opportunity to demonstrate excellent service and a positive, health environment was missed. Very possibly, patients might be going home to complain to work-mates, friends and family members about the terrible care provided by the hospital. And finally, these two individuals and other unit staff experienced stress and turmoil due to the ongoing, negative situation.

In *The Magic of Conflict* Thomas Crum shares the good news that conflict does not have to be so costly. Rather, Crum observes that we can choose to view conflict as a natural part of life. In the world around us, the physical forces and changing weather patterns of the world around us can be seen as the natural conflicts that shape the environment. For example, it is the conflict, or irritation within an oyster that creates a pearl. It is the conflict between water and land that creates beaches, vast canyons, and scenic mountain valleys. Crum notes that conflict is as gift of energy in which neither side loses. Rather, productive conflict is the natural outgrowth of change, of improvement, or movement away from the status quo.

Traditionally, conflict is defined as a situation in which "the ideas, interests or behavior of two or more individuals or groups clash." Nothing in this definition suggests conflict must be unproductive. Rather, conflict occurs when ideas, interests, or behaviors of two or more individuals or groups are not in

agreement - e.g., you may want to accomplish a task in one way, and I may want to accomplish that task in a different way. It is often the case that because of our different perspectives, we come up with an even better solution than we would have independently.

Peg Pickering observes that there are at least five different methods peopletake when resolving a conflict (Figure 1). Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages depending on the individuals involved, circumstances, social values, cultural, political, and religious factors. Each is also appropriate depending on the situation and each result in different combinations of win-lose outcomes. In other words, there is no one best conflict style in all situations; rather, one style may be appropriate for one situation and inappropriate for another.

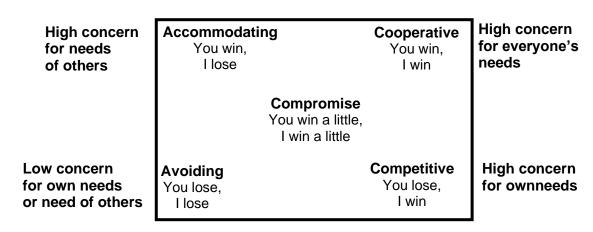


Fig. 1. Conflict Management Styles

The first method for dealing with conflict is avoidance. An individual who avoids conflict attempts to ignore the conflict rather than face it openly, like in our example of Mary at Bright Futures Hospital. When one avoids conflict, they are being unassertive and uncooperative. Avoidance occurs when one ignores the conflict non-verbally or emotionally. By minimizing a problem, changing the subject, joking about a conflict, or putting the problem off, people avoid the issue in question. This creates a lose- situation.

The advantage of the avoiding style is that it may help maintain relationships that could otherwise be damaged by surfacing the conflict. The disadvantage of this style is that conflicts do not get resolved. When individuals continually rely on avoiding conflict, others tend to take advantage of them. When a health care organization, its management, or employees avoid conflict, they run the risk that the conflict will escalate and any challenges between groups or individuals will be amplified. In fact, a primary complaint by employees is that their manager will not address conflict when it occurs; rather, that management pretends not to 'see' the conflict, provides only superficial efforts to respond to the conflict, or avoids conflict altogether.

The avoiding style is appropriate to use if your interest in the conflict is

not high, the conflict itself is fairly trivial, confrontation will damage the relationship unnecessarily, emotions are very high, and if you do not have time to address the conflict appropriately. If you do not have time, or if emotions are particularly high, it may be best to postpone the conflict discussion until a later time. This style is inappropriate when an individual repeatedly avoids conflict which may cause the individual to build stress, unhappiness or resentment. Finally, when this style is overused, problems do not get resolved.

Another method of responding to conflict is accommodation or 'giving in.' When one relies on the accommodating style, one is being unassertive by attempting to satisfy the other party but neglecting their own needs. This creates a win-lose situation. The accommodating style is different from the avoiding style because when one avoids conflict, they do not have to do anything that they did not want to do. When one accommodates someone else, they are giving in to the other individual.

The advantage of the accommodating style is that relationships are maintained by going along with the other person. The disadvantage is that 'giving in' may be counterproductive. The person who is 'giving-in,' may have a better idea or solution. As with the avoiding style, when individuals overuse the accommodating style, they tend to get taken advantage of. The accommodating style is appropriate to use when you enjoy being a follower, the issue or problem is not important to you, but is to the other party, it is important to maintain the relationship, or the time needed to resolve the conflict is limited.

The third method is to compromise or 'You give half and I give half.' When utilizing this style, an individual attempts to resolve the conflict through assertive, give and take negotiations. This leads to an 'I win some, you win some' outcome. The advantage of the compromising style is that it can be effective for resolving a conflict relatively quickly, and working relationships are maintained. The disadvantage is that by compromising, both parties may be giving up something that they really need or want. This leads to dissatisfaction and may ultimately undermine the solution that is agreed upon. It is appropriate to use the compromising style when the issues are complex and there are no simple, clear solutions, when both parties have equal power and are interested in different solutions, when time is short or when a solution will only be temporary.

In the fourth or competitive approach, the person with the most power in terms of time, money, resources, position or communication style negotiates from a 'I win, you lose' point of view. An individual relying on this style is generally more aggressive, uncooperative and does what they can to get the results they desire at the expense of others. They may use authority, threats, intimidation or call for majority voting if they think they can win. Individuals who gravitate to the competitive style like to deal with people who are avoiders and accommodators because it is much easier to 'run all over them.'

The advantage of the competitive style is that sometimes you can reach better decisions in a short amount of time. This can be helpful when the competitive individual is correct, but this method often results in defensiveness

and leads others to dig in their heels, thereby bringing the resolution of a conflict to a halt. Those people who continually wind up on the losing end of a conflict situation will generally begin to respond through overt or passive aggression, withholding information or effort, sabotage, or otherwise 'getting back' at the individual who 'won.' It can also lead to what the Gallup Organization terms 'disengagement' by employees. That said, thecompetitive style may also be appropriate to use when an unpopular action must be taken on an important issue, commitment by others is not crucial to the implementation, maintaining relationships is not important, or the need to resolve the conflict is particularly urgent.

The final approach people use when dealing with situations involving conflict is to cooperate. The cooperative method is preferable for organizations and groups which need a method for managing conflict that respects the needs of others and enables everyone to freely assert their own needs and wants. (Current research clearly indicates that this is the direction those organizations on the 'cutting edge' are already headed. See Frederic Laloux's work, *Reinventing Organizations* for a thorough explanation of this trend.)

Cooperative decision-making assumes that the parties involved share a similar purpose that they want to achieve a mutually satisfactory or 'win-win' solution, and that they are fully capable of doing so. Cooperative decision-making does not mean that all group members have to be great friends or that they always agree with each other, but does assume that the parties involved can create enough options, choices or solutions for each side to find satisfactory agreement.

While avoiders and accommodators are more concerned about the needs of *others*, and competitors are concerned about their *own* needs, parties relying on the cooperative approach are genuinely interested in finding the best solution to a problem that is satisfactory to all participants. Unlike the competitor, the cooperative individual is willing and often eager to change his or her opinion or approach if a better solution can be achieved. And while collaborating can be based on withholding information, the cooperative style is based on open, honest communication.

The advantage of the cooperative style is that it tends to achieve the best solutions as all of those involved are honestly and openly trying to achieve the best possible result. The disadvantage of this approach is that it takes time and skill to implement effectively. It is appropriate to use the cooperative style when you are dealing with an important problem that requires the best solution, people are willing to place the group goal over self-interest, maintaining relationships is important, and time is available.

Slaikeu and Hasson, two researchers in the area of conflict management, note that each of these methods of responding to conflict is appropriate for different circumstances, and, as noted above, have constructive and destructive forms. For example, in one situation, you may not have a real interest in an issue and avoid responding to a conflict because of other higher priorities. This would be an example of a constructive response to a conflict. On the other hand,

if you avoid a conflict which is causing stress, or in which you have a clear stake, this would be an example of a destructive response to a conflict.

Causes of unproductive conflict. In our professional and personal lives, we live at a frantic pace. At work we put in eight to ten hours a day trying to balance pressing daily tasks with the long-term growth, planning, and development needed for personal and organizational success. We then add on an additional one or two hours of commute time, trips to the grocery store, taking kids to band or soccer practice, and rushing to complete errands all in the same day. With all of these pressures it is no wonder that we have conflicts at home, with other drivers on the highway, within our work units, across divisions, and throughout companies. There are three reasons why many organizations suffer the effects of unproductive conflict. (Figure 2)

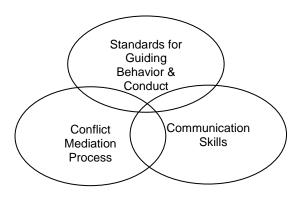


Fig. 2 Conflict Mediation System

First, management and employees do not share, practice, and hold each other accountable to *standards for guiding behavior and conduct*. For example, in our consulting practice, we occasionally find that executives, managers and employees *say* they value respecting and listening to others, diversity of opinion and so on, but in practice, behave in ways that are interpreted as being dishonest, adversarial, authoritarian, or unethical.

Second, we frequently find that managers and employees lack a *common process* for resolving conflicts when they occur. It is important to have a process which all people involved understand and apply to enable everyone to safely share ideas, opinions, needs, goals and action strategies. This process should encourage each person to work collaboratively with others to keep the higher purpose, goals and standards of the organization in mind so that a solution is achieved that is truly best for everyone involved.

Third, it is important to have the *skills to communicate effectively*, and not violate the dignity and worth of others. Instead, with effective communications skills, people are able to communicate with each other in ways that ensures understanding, builds trust, and enhances relationships. This means having the skill to avoid making assumptions, speaking in ways that is belittling or disrespectful.

As Figure One above illustrates, these three factors are interdependent; a

change in one affects the other two. In our experience, all three must be present for people to consistently address conflict effectively. To understand how these three factors work within an organization, consider the following scenario. Imagine that you are watching a professional soccer team. The team you favor is maneuvering to score a goal, and one of the players is open to receive a pass and kick the winning goal. Instead of passing the ball to the open player, the player with the ball tries to kick the goal himself and it is blocked. The opposing team regroups, moves down the field and scores the game winning goal.

After the game, the team manager asks the player why he did pass the ball to the other player so they could get an easy score and win the game. "Well," the player replies, "Yesterday that other player and I had an argument and I'm not going to pass the ball to him again until he apologizes. Not only that, he comes to practice late, and thinks his position on the teamis more important than mine."

Do you feel this is a valid response? How would you react if you were the team manager? How do you think the other players on the team would feel? What must the fans be thinking? Wouldn't you be angry, disappointed, and incredulous that a professional soccer player would resort to such a juvenile way of thinking during a game? We suspect that most people would feel completely justified in saying, "I don't care which team member you are angry at, your job is to help us win the game!"

Now ask yourself, why is it that we seldom do not see this level of petty behavior on *any* professional sports team. We believe it is because professional athletes understand and practice the three elements of the conflict mediation system discussed above.

First, professional athletes are committed to standards which guide their behavior and conduct of every other player on the field. These standards include the rules of the game, roles and responsibilities, penalties for playing poorly (fines, loss of employment or endorsements, ostracism from other team members, bad press, etc.) and rewards for playing well (salary, bonuses, fan adoration, endorsements and so on). Professional athletes understand that if they are to win, they must play as a team. This means valuing team play and each other's skills over personal egos.

Second, they have a strong and well understood process by which they play. This process includes the systematic steps or stages that must be completed in order to play the game. For example, in American football, the process of play includes a coin toss, kick-off, kick return, downs, defense, and extra point attempts. The process of play is logical and fair. A team does not try an extra point, kick off, and then have the coin toss. This is also true for other sports.

Finally, professional athletes not only work hard to develop their skills, but they also practice continually and receive constant coaching to enhance their ability to play the game. Professional athletes don't practice once at the beginning of the season and simply play 'real' games the remainder of the year. They practice the same basic skills, review strategies, and receive individualized improvement coaching on a daily basis throughout the year.

Now, keep the baseball game in mind as you read the next scenario taken from a real incident.

Wendy Brown is the operations manager for Children's Hospital. One day, Wendy receives a phone call from the hospital administrator who tells Windy that heis not happy with the cleanliness of he is seeing in the complex. The administrator advises Wendy that she needs to have a talk with the janitorial and cleaning staff before the day is out, and he wants to see immediate improvement.

Anxious to get to the bottom of this problem, Wendy assures the administrator that she will personally investigate the problem and see that it is corrected. She hurries down to the floor to talk to those cleaning the building. When she arrives, the evening shift change is taking place.

As Wendy waits for the shift change to be completed, she notices that members of the first shift are not making any effort to communicate the status of the building or what areas need extra cleaning and polishing. Wendy knows that it is vital that the incoming shift understand which floors are on rotation to be polished that night.

Wendy stops the outgoing shift supervisor and asks why his departing shift is not ensuring that the incoming shift members completely understand the maintenance schedule.

"Oh," the supervisor replies, "A couple of weeks ago, I was trying to explain a potential problem at our shift change meeting. The supervisor of the second shift didn't agree and made it look like I didn't know what I was talking about in front of everyone. She is such a big 'know-it-all,' and made me look like an idiot. Worse, no-one even said a thing to her or stuck up for me. You can bet I'm not going bring that problem up again!"

"But certainly," Wendy answered, "You realize that a poor pass-down process must mean that over the past few weeks the quality of the floors and other building maintenancehas been slipping and must be below our requirements?"

"Of course," he says, "But I am not going to get my tail chewed off whenever I try to point out a potential problem. Plus, once she hears from you, it will prove I was right, and she was wrong!"

How would you react if you were Wendy? Wouldn't you be angry & disappointed? Wouldn't you feel absolutely justified in saying, "I don't care which other employee you are angry at; you're paid to produce high quality work!" Incidentally, when we present this scenario at workshops, we very frequently have participants laugh, smile, shake their heads and observe, "That happens here all the time!" Aren't the employees of these healthcare organizations paid professionals? Aren't they supposed to be working together with the benefit rest of the group? Isn't 'patient care,' 'customer service,' 'high quality,' 'reducing mistakes,' and 'working as a team' the purpose or desired outcome for both organizations?

The answer is, of course, yes. Yes, the employees in the two healthcare organizations should be working together to resolve conflicts productively. But--

the difference is that on the playing field, unproductive conflict is apparent to *everyone*. It is apparent because everyone including players, fans, and coaches all understand the standards that guide behavior and conduct, the process of the game, and the skills required of the players so well that any deviation from the standard of excellence is abundantly clear. Further, the players and coaches all hold each other accountable for performing at their best all of the time, not just some of the time. Those sports organizations that do not put their entire focus on ensure these three elements are enacted at the highest level are generally playing at the bottom of their league.

We have found that well intentioned healthcare organizations frequently 1) lack, or fail to follow, clear standards for guiding behavior and conduct with each other, 2) do not have a process by which they can make decisions, resolve problems and address conflicts, and 3) lack skills needed to communicate effectively with each other and which are practiced regularly. As a result, these organizations routinely ignore and/or fail to deal with unproductive conflict until these conflicts reach crisis proportions.

Organizations rely upon employees to work interdependently because it is simply good business. When people work well together, the patient care, customer service, and operations, and delivery of services can be significantly enhanced. Studies conducted by Dr. Michael Beyerlein, former Executive Director for the Center for Collaborative Organizations, found that groups which work collaboratively are more effective in assisting organizations to:

- 1. Improve service delivery
- 2. Meet or exceed customer needs
- 3. Introduce improvements and/or innovations
- 4. Integrate and streamline organizational structures, systems and processes
 - 5. Design, develop and produce products
 - 6. Enhance employee morale and retention
 - 7. Speed new employee orientation and training
 - 8. Reduce costs and inventory while increasing service quality

Where group collaboration is lacking or inefficient, service delivery falters, customer needs are not fulfilled, improvements or innovations lag, and maintaining the status quo becomes the norm as product cycle times suffer. Instead of increased profits and job security, profits fall and people worry about the long-term safety of their jobs.

In these and similar studies, organizations and group members also identified sources that not only sap the efficiency and effectiveness of organizational work environments, but cause great stress among employees and management.

Sources of conflict include situations in which employees:

- 1. Consistently arrive to work late, take breaks early, and come back from breaks late
 - 2. Avoid helping orient or train other employees
 - 3. Show little interest in learning new skills or taking on new

responsibilities

- 4. Intentionally belittle, put-down, or tease other employees
- 5. Fail to communicate needs or expectations
- 6. 'Punch the clock' and go home, or never stay late in a crisis
- 7. Refuse to share tools, information, or supplies with others
- 8. Form cliques that side against other employees or work units

Employees often report that a great deal of the conflict they experience is related to poor management. Sources of conflict reported by employees include managers who:

- Practice favoritism
- Lack of integrity and honesty
- Fail to recognize and reward employee contributions
- Fail to support or provide opportunities for employee growth and development
 - Fail to provide direction or clearly communicate expectations
- Have 'retired on the job' and fail to initiate or support positive change
 - Provide inconsistent or inadequate communication
 - 'Talk the talk,' but do not 'walk the talk'
 - Fail to address conflict
- Apply one standard of ethics to employees, another to management

If unproductive conflict has such negative consequences, why do we expect so much from professional athletes, and so little from managers and employees in organizations? After all, like professional athletes, managers and employees are paid and trained to apply work-related and interpersonal skills, to work effectively within the organizational process, and to be committed to the organization. As suggested earlier, we believe management and employees fail to work with each other and deal with conflict effectively because they lack a system for doing so. If management and employees do not share standards of conduct and behavior, have a process for addressing problems and conflicts, and lack effective communications skills, why should we not expect a high level of discord?

The Conflict Mediation System. The Conflict Mediation System presented in our book, Conflict Management in Healthcare: Creating a Culture of Cooperation, provideshealthcare organizations with a method for resolving the conflicts that act as barriers to patient care and organizational efficiency, and that cause employees stress and frustration. When fully implemented, this system will also encourage management and employees to recognize and resolve conflicts productively at the lowest possible organizational level. The conflict mediation process provides managers and employees with a common approach for addressing problems, challenges and conflicts when they occur and a common language and model for sharing ideas, opinions, needs and goals.

Together, these three elements comprise a system. Eliminating,

minimizing or adapting one element of the system changes the nature of the results you can expect. For example, if a healthcare organization has a process for mediating conflicts, and effective communication skills, but management behaves in ways that are disrespectful, unethical, lack integrity and are dishonest, employees will lack trust and a cooperative spirit. If an organization has standards which guide behavior and conduct and a process for mediating conflicts, but employees lack the skills to communicate effectively with each other, miscommunication will occur, mistakes will be made and morale will suffer. If an organization has standards of behavior and conduct and effective communication skills, but lacks a process for resolving conflicts, then management and employees will approach conflicts and challenges without a common language or framework for logically addressing those conflicts. Assumptions and expectations may not be surfaced, and those involved may find themselves leaping from identifying the conflict to a 'solution' that is short lived.

The good news is that unproductive conflict does not need be a prescription for poor performance and fractured interpersonal relationships. Applying these three principles above can significantly enhance the ability of your employees and management to communicate clearly, work constructively and cooperative to reduce unproductive conflict on the job to significantly enhance employee morale and the quality of care in your healthcare organization.

REFERENCES

- 1. Beyerlein, M. The collaborative work systems field book / Jossey-Bass// San Francisco, 2003.
- 2. *Crum, T.* The magic of conflict: Turning a life of work into a work of art.: A Touchstone Book. New York, 1987
 - 3. Loehr, J., Schwartz, T. The power of full engagement. // Free Press. New York, 2003
- 4. *Pickering*, *P*..How to manage conflict: Turn all conflicts into win-win outcomes. /Franklin Lakes// Career Press, 1999
- 5. *Slaikeu, K., Hasson, R.*. Controlling the costs of conflict /Jossey-Bass// San Francisco, 1998.