

Managing conflict in the OR setting

By Paul Preston, Ph.D.

Usually, conflicts are associated with the concepts of aggression or hostility. The term itself conjures up negative and unproductive behaviour which must be avoided.

For today's operating room manager/supervisor, conflict can have some very positive outcomes - if properly managed.

Conflict, if it is creative - for example, individual differences in policies, guidelines or management technique - can result in better planning and organization. Within any hospital surgical setting, properly managed conflict between an OR manager and his or her staff can help encourage employees to show more commitment toward patient care. Creative conflict can also keep the staff members "on their toes" and aware of their responsibilities.

From the above, dealing with conflict may sound like a risky undertaking. However, it is often better than dealing with a lethargic 'who cares' attitude that can spread and infect other employees, and even the welfare of patients.

What is conflict?

Conflict is any situation in which the goals, methods, aims or objectives of two or more parties are in opposition or appear to be in opposition. It is also a situation where potential solutions appear to be, or in fact are, mutually exclusive. Each party in the conflict has a number of options or alternate strategies that can be used to create an imbalance.

Conflict management involves dealing with a conflict in a way that minimizes the negative aftermath of a conflict. It also involves attempting to maximize the chance to create a good working relationship in the future. Conflict management involves taking a long-term view.

Many conflicts arise over the allocation of scarce resources. If the director of nursing in a hospital wants a major educational program this year, and management believes this year is the time for a major renovation, conflict is likely over how to spend the hospital's/department's limited time and money. The choice of spending for education may mean little or no funding for renovations, and vice versa.

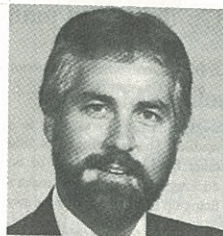
Conflicts may develop over anything: employee performance standards, or standards of patient care; location of meetings; handling budgets; the roles of various supervisors and managers; even the colours used to paint the staff room. While some of these conflicts have (or could have) a major impact on the organization, and others may seem trivial, none can be completely ignored for any length of time.

Lingering nature of conflict

As dedicated operating room supervisors and managers, your goal should be to manage the conflicts facing you. We tend to think that when a

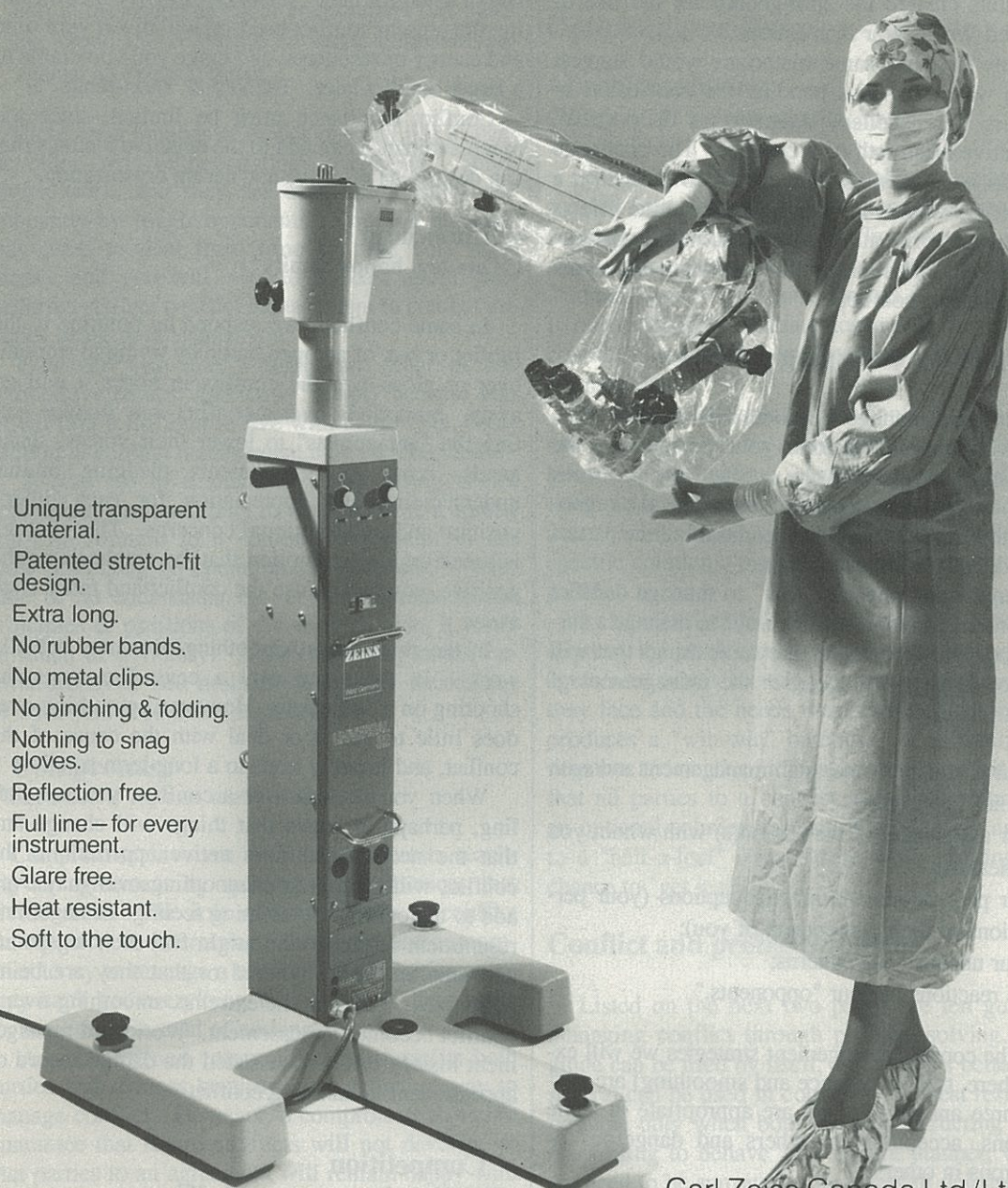
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Dr. Paul Preston is a consultant specializing in health care management. He is a Professor of Management at the University of Texas in San Antonio. This article was excerpt from pertinent passages from his book "Leadership Strategies for Health Care Managers." This book can be obtained (\$19.00 CDN) by writing Empire Publications, 16019 Wolf Creek, San Antonio, TX, 78232. A Copy will be sent post-paid.



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conflict is settled, it goes away and is no longer a concern. The truth is, few conflicts are ever really resolved with no trace or aftermath.

Throughout history, the "resolution" of one conflict became the basis for a subsequent conflict. The Treaty of Versailles "ended" World War I. Yet, many historians feel that the treaty's conditions and stipulations created the springboard for the rise of Hitler and World War II in Europe.

Many of these same historians would suggest that the way the Allies handled the conclusion of WWII is an excellent example of a positive, constructive aftermath of a conflict. The challenge to you as an O.R. nurse/manager is to behave in a way that minimizes the damaging, negative effects of conflicts. Fortunately there are a number of strategies to help one manage the long-range and short-range aspects of conflict.

Strategies for managing conflict

How you manage conflict will depend on a number of obvious factors: your personality, the other people involved in the conflict, the pressures everyone is under in a conflict situation, the organizational setting, the hidden agendas of all the parties involved, and the list could go on.

There is no "one best way" to manage conflict any more than there is a "best way" to manage a surgical floor. However, there are some things that will influence how you proceed in the management of conflict situations:

- a) Your past experience, with management and with conflict experiences;
- b) Your assessment of the person(s) with whom you are dealing;
- c) Your perceptions and metaperceptions (your perceptions of their perceptions of you);
- d) Your unconscious patterns;
- e) The reactions of your "opponents."

Of the conflict management strategies we will examine here, two (avoidance and smoothing) are passive, three are active. All are appropriate in some situations, acceptable in others and dangerous or disastrous in others:

• Avoidance ("I don't want to talk about it...")

Avoidance is simply doing nothing about a conflict. An ostrich with its head in the sand makes an enemy disappear to the same extent that ignoring a

conflict makes it go away. Yet, avoidance can be a useful short-range strategy if it is used to gain an advantage by allowing for a better time, place or situation for confronting the conflict.

It can also be useful when people are too emotional or when you are facing several simultaneous conflicts, and certain lower priority conflicts must be put aside for later. It can be effective if confronting the present conflict head-on will divert your time and energy or resources, and make you vulnerable to a larger conflict later. The key is "short-range."

Conflict avoidance must be limited, since too much avoidance can add to the negative feelings that can destroy an effective and caring organization.

• Smoothing ("One big, happy family")

In some conflicts, we respond by pointing to the futility or risk of an open battle by trying to smooth-over or gloss-over the conflict in hopes it will go away. Smoothing-over a conflict may involve getting the "antagonists" to lower their voices, shake hands, issue joint statements pledging mutual understanding and appreciation for each other's position and organizational concerns. This strategy is based on the assumption that, by emphasizing the positive, you can defuse the conflict and make it go away.

In the short-range, smoothing-over may actually work - in the same way a cease-fire stops the shooting on a battlefield. However, smoothing-over does little to get at or deal with the cause of the conflict, and it rarely leads to a long-term solution.

When you smooth-over a conflict, you are stalling, perhaps in hopes that things will change and that the need for a more active approach to the conflict will disappear. Smoothing-over may even add to the conflict by creating feelings of anger and resentment in those who might feel their legitimate concerns are being ignored or that they are being patronized. Taken at the extreme, smoothing-over a conflict becomes appeasement. World and management history has demonstrated the dismal record of appeasement in handling conflict.

• Competition ("We'll do it my way, or else!")

The competitor in a conflict takes a "win-lose" approach. He or she tries to force a victory at the expense of the other parties. The winner has more power and can force the loser to accept whatever solution he or she decides to impose. But a forced

solution can also lead to some serious negatives, such as the following:

- the loser is inclined to sabotage
- the exploration of other alternatives is blocked
- positions become hardened
- left unchecked, the hostility created by competition in the operating room environment can make the organization unable to work cooperatively against an external threat.

There are a number of tactics one can use to beat the other party in negotiating a conflict. These tactics work, and they are used comfortably and frequently by 'tough' opponents. You as a manager may have to deal from time to time with such people, and you will need to at least adopt your preferred style of conflict management to combat the tactics being used against you.

However, you may actually not want to use competitive tactics voluntarily, simply because you would find it difficult to live with them. Yet, competition in conflict management may be a necessity.

If you are in a situation where losing is not acceptable, you must play to win. At best, a forced win-lose solution to a conflict may result in the loser promising co-operation at "gunpoint." With little or no enthusiasm for, or commitment to the principles or positions of the winning side, it won't be much of a victory. A succession of losses can stifle creativity and motivation, thereby weakening an otherwise productive organization.

• Compromise ("Let's see if we can make a deal...")

Compromise involves conflicting interests reaching an agreement by splitting the differences that divide them. The role of compromise in conflict management is interesting. Often we use compromise to try to manage a conflict. Both parties agree they can't get everything they want, so they settle for something instead of nothing.

A well-designed compromise that benefits both parties and reduces hostility is an effective way to manage conflict. However, a compromise does not guarantee that future conflicts will not develop, or that parties to an agreement will remain happy with any agreement reached.

When bargaining is used as a strategy for managing conflict, there is always a danger that the bargain will come unstuck and that the conflict will flare again. If each party to a bargain trusts the other, the compromise will hold for a while. If there is a strong third party involved (such as upper

management), he or she will be able to keep the parties faithful to their bargain. However, the very nature of a bargain (giving a little to get a little) means that each party in the conflict wins and loses something. Thus, a perception of what could have been, may be the factor that gets in the way of future bargains.

Optimizing conflict...

• Problem solving ("Let's see if we can all win...")

All the strategies we usually associate with conflict have advantages and appropriate uses. The common disadvantage that conflict strategies share is their potential for future conflict, the so-called "hidden agenda" or latent conflict in the short-run. In other words, these strategies may help you handle conflict in the short term, but they may cost you in the long run.

The best overall solution for conflict management on a long term basis is problem-solving, also known as optimizing, confrontation or collaboration. It involves changing the focus of a conflict away from blame, starting points, causes and specific solutions, toward an overall remedy for the problem at hand.

It is often called problem-solving because it requires the participants to seek common points of agreement while focusing on the mutual problems they face and the needs they share. This approach produces a "win-win" outcome. It minimizes the negative aftermath of a present conflict. This means that all parties to a conflict commit themselves to an optional solution instead of grudgingly agreeing to a "half-a-loaf" compromise while waiting for a chance to "get it all."

Conflict and problem-solving

Listed on the next two pages are ten guides to managing conflict through problem-solving. Each guide can be used by itself, although it's better when several can be used in concert. The best results are possible only when both (or all) conflicting parties are willing to behave in a mature manner, without the need to be surrounded by layers of defenses.

Adaptation and reality

When facing a conflict situation, assess yourself as well as the others involved. Assess also the stakes and the setting. Determine how important the conflict is to you and to the department. Keep

in mind that no one strategy works best in all situations. Remember that an optimum strategy for confronting conflict head-on may still result in a bargain between the involved parties. The goal in problem-solving is to minimize the negative aftermath of a conflict and thereby keep the conflict and the interpersonal relationships manageable and productive.

Conclusion

The one who takes on the responsibility of managing a conflict must be realistic and realize that some conflicts can and will cause permanent damage despite your best efforts and the best efforts of all others involved. Conflict management can be

thought of as a sort of "forest-fire management." This manager doesn't try to put out every fire or save every tree. They plan their battles and calculate their possible losses, always with the goal of considering what's best for the entire forest. If success is achieved, damage to the forest is minimized and use of the forest resources is maximized.

Seeds of future growth

In carrying this analogy further, consider this: after a bad burn, new trees spring to life and the forest goes on. If you handle your conflicts in an open, creative manner, you'll still maintain control of the seeds of growth and productivity. ■

Guidelines for managing conflict through problem solving

1. Direct confrontation between opposing parties is essential

This is the key element in an optimizing approach to conflict. The opposing sides must be willing to face each other head-on. There can be no opportunity allowed for ducking issues, smiling to make things 'appear' friendly, or lining up bargaining chips for swapping later.

2. Personal feelings, hidden agendas and relationship issues should be acted upon first

In your first contact with your opponent, try to talk about how you feel about each other. Often conflicts are heightened and solutions are made more difficult because there is a "hidden agenda" in the conflict. If one can handle the relationship conflict first, the road to an agreement over substantive issues is made easier.

Personality issues rarely go away when an issue being conflicted is settled. Regardless of the settlement reached, relationship issues will remain as a sort of "aftermath." They will form the basis of the next conflict. By reducing the potential for these future conflicts, as you do when you deal with the personality issues, you are taking a systems view of the conflict. You won't necessarily change your opponents feelings about you, but at least you will be better able to separate their feelings about you from their feelings about your position on an issue. Naturally, your opponent receives the same benefit. However, if the comments you make about your hidden agendas concerning the other person are likely to offend, it's better not to bring them up directly.

3. Minimize status difference

When confronting a conflict head-on, it is best to keep the opposing parties on a reasonably equal footing. In working out conflicts with your staff, the status difference can be important. Imagine your superior, sitting in her office behind a huge, executive-type desk, while you sprawl in front of the desk on a too-low sofa chair.

You can hardly communicate as equals and ignore the status differences when they are so pronounced. Using your status symbols can be useful when you are trying to win in a conflict. But when you use them in a situation where you are trying to problem solve, you will likely only succeed in making the other person inferior - which is not an atmosphere conducive to open, shared trust and quality communication.

A better approach is to find a neutral site for the discussions if your objective is to work out an optimal solution to the conflict. On the other hand, if the objective is to reinforce your position, your status is important. But, if you are more interested in problem solving than winning, neutrality is better.

4. Don't try to place blame

In most conflicts, the participants spend a lot of time trying to shift the blame for a problem from one side to the other. If one side can successfully fix blame on one of the opponents, it's possible for them to "win" the conflict.

Keep in mind, however, that in a problem solving approach, placing blame (except for educational purposes) serves no useful purpose.



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