



Notes from the Consultant's Corner

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Keeping the Peace... Resolving Conflict at Work

Have you ever had one of those days when there is so much tension that you actually volunteer to clean up the exercise yard?! Conflict in the work place is a fact of life. In veterinary settings, staff conflict is not only inevitable, but is often exacerbated by the stressful nature of your work. It is also made more difficult because you have little time to follow-up. There are few opportunities to “work things out” when you can barely get all your work done as it is. No one can prevent conflict from occurring—it is the natural result of different people interacting on a regular basis. What can be controlled is *how* conflict is dealt with.

If you want to successfully resolve conflict at work, it requires that you have the right attitude to fix it. You can model positive behavior by addressing the conflicts you experience openly and honestly. Setting a standard for others is invaluable (e.g., refusing to participate in gossip, giving others the benefit of the doubt, and approaching team members with concerns before making harmful assumptions).

Strategies for Preventing and Resolving Staff Conflicts:

- **Clarify expectations of each staff members' duties and roles:** Expectations must be made overt and discussed frequently to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts.
- **Be flexible in managing patient care:** Maintain a certain standard of care, but recognize that individuals may have different approaches and that the same result may be achieved through a different process. There does not have to always be just one way to achieve a particular goal.
- **When talking to co-workers, use “I” statements to prevent them from getting defensive:** Use language that lends insight into your feelings rather than places blame. (“I need to feel that my work is respected and I feel criticized when you are abrupt with me during procedures” versus “You need to stop yelling at me during procedures.”)
- **If in doubt, ask:** It is very dangerous to assume anything about what a person is thinking or feeling. Many conflicts and misunderstandings can be avoided by giving people a chance to explain or apologize for what they meant or said before making a snap judgment and adding fuel to the fire.
- **Allow time for people to vent frustrations, feelings, and concerns before moving to problem solving.** Without

proper acknowledgement, people are generally not ready to let go of their emotions and move towards problem solving. Insure that feelings are acknowledged in some way by demonstrating empathy and understanding.

- **When getting to the “heart” of a conflict, try asking these questions to resolve conflict:** What is the underlying conflict if you separate it from the individuals involved? Why is this issue important to those involved? What are their motivations? Are there any other people who may subtly contribute to the problem? What does each person want or need? What might they need to do to reach a compromise? Is there something that needs to change to resolve the conflict? Do I have my own biases and do they affect how I see the conflict? How do other people see or contribute to the problem? What will happen or needs to occur if the conflict is not resolved?
- **Instigate a firm policy that all employees must treat each other with civility and respect.** Make it clear that the inability to meet such requirements should result in: A prompt managerial response Appropriate verbal and/or written warnings as needed Dismissal of an employee who cannot show civility and respect to co-workers
- **If needed, retain an outside mediator or organizational consultant.** There may be some conflicts that are so entrenched or complex that it may be helpful to utilize the skills of an outside person. A new person can bring a fresh perspective and offer new insights or approaches to problems. This is usually reserved for conflicts that are far-reaching and causing significant disruptions in work and compromising patient or client care.

Conflict resolution is a communication skill that can be developed and practiced over time. While it is tempting to dismiss the conflict and assume that it will “blow over” especially when your time is so limited; it is far better to address the conflict as soon as possible. This will help you to keep a cooperative, productive, and happy veterinary team.



(photo from Dreamstime.com)