



Conflict Resolution - The Synopsis

- The problem with conflict is not in its existence but rather in how it is managed.
- Controversy exists about the *value* of conflict. Many believe that, at its best, conflict is disruptive. Most agree that, at its worst, conflict is destructive to team harmony and patient safety. However, conflict may also serve as a creative force, by providing both initiative and incentive to solve problems.
- “Conflict is often the result of miscommunication, and may be ‘fueled’ by ineffective communication².”
- General sources of conflict:
 1. Real or imagined differences in values
 2. Dissimilar goals among individuals
 3. Poor communication
 4. Personalization of generic or organizational issues

See some examples below of sources of conflict in healthcare organisations and some of the common causes.

Conflict between Staff

- Differences of opinion (between clinical staff with different areas of expertise)
- Perceived or actual difference in values
- Lack of familiarity with the staff with whom you are communicating
- Miscommunication & misunderstanding – misinterpretation of information given/not given, poorly delivered communication, fatigue
- Emotions and egos
- Lack of respect shown to staff in different specialties
- Need to escalate & advocate for patients
- Workload inequities (laziness, not finishing tasks, high standards)
- Rudeness (HALT) & Stress

Conflict between Staff & Patients

- Different perspectives and mismatched expectations – relative importance of issues, what can happen in the ED vs inpatient vs outpatient, causes of presenting complaints, appropriate levels of investigation and treatment
- Frustrations at delays in system
- Perceived rudeness from staff

Healthcare environment

- ED is busy, noisy with many distractions – impairs communication
- Phone consultations (lack of non-verbal cues) vs face to face
- Overcrowded waiting rooms/corridors

Health system issues

- Frustrations (about inefficiencies in the system)
- Lack of resources, workload, time pressures, high patient acuity, constant/irregular influx of patients
- ED brings work – more and more work – to other specialties
- Work schedule causing fatigue
- Misconceptions about the role of the ED
- Toxic culture, discrimination & bullying
- Unclear or ambiguous processes eg who does syncope get admitted under in your hospital Gen Med vs Cardiology; admitting rights vs discharging rights

Values

- Mismatched values of individuals (speed vs accuracy, relationships vs tasks)
- Respect

“Conflict exists when one person has a need of another, and that need is not being met”

What are the advantages of resolving conflict well?

1. Improved communication with patients and colleagues
2. Lowered levels of stress
3. Increased productivity in the workplace
4. Promotion of healthy relationships with colleagues and staff
5. Improved patient and employee satisfaction
6. Decreased staff turnover/ increased staff retention
7. Prevention of future conflict, or at least resolution of future conflict more effectively and expeditiously
8. Improved overall patient care

Conflict Resolution Styles

An individual's preferred approach to managing conflict is likely to be adopted as the dominant approach that generally works for that individual. Everyone has their preferred style. And every conflict is different, depending on the type of situation at play.

There is no one single right way to handle conflict, so there is not one correct style. Having self-awareness of your own style, considering the style of the person you are in conflict with, and the needs of the situation, can help us choose the right approach.

Thomas and Kilmann offered a matrix illustrating five distinct responses to conflict as they vary along the axes of *assertiveness* (the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns) and *cooperativeness* (the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns)

These five styles are as follows:

- a. Avoiding
- b. Accommodating
- c. Compromising
- d. Competing
- e. Collaborating.

(See *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* below)

Each of these methods for dealing with conflict has situations when it may be effective.

1. The **AVOIDING** style uses the premise "I leave and you win" or "I'll think about it tomorrow." The goal in this style is to delay or walk away. This style is characterized by low assertiveness and low cooperativeness. Neither party's concerns are met when this style of conflict resolution is employed.
2. In the **ACCOMODATING** style, one party lets the other win ("It would be my pleasure" is the extreme. This style is characterized by low assertiveness and high cooperativeness, and it can be either an act of selflessness or one of obeying orders. The goal of this method is to yield or give in, typically by ignoring or neglecting one's own concerns to accommodate those of the other party. It may be useful for issues of little importance, or for creating good will and demonstrating reasonableness. Unfortunately, the accommodator can harbor ill will if this style becomes dominant and is abused by others. In the extreme, this style may result in poor patient outcomes.
3. In the **COMPROMISING** style of conflict resolution, both parties "win some and lose some." Made famous by television personality Monty Hall, "Let's make a deal" best describes this style's philosophy. This method has moderate assertiveness and cooperativeness and involves negotiating or splitting any differences of opinion. The goal is to find some middle ground, often expeditiously, and to exchange concessions, unlike the more time consuming style of collaborating. The

compromising method may be helpful in issues of moderate importance, especially when time constraints exist.

4. In the **COMPETING** style, a conquest within the contest is the goal of the competitors. This style results in someone's winning and someone's losing ("my way or the highway"). High assertiveness and little cooperativeness dominate this interaction. This style may have utility when making unpopular decisions, especially for a leader or manager. This style tends to create quick results, and it may be used when bargaining is not an option or the position you support is undeniably correct. This style is, however, very one sided and is likely to be unpopular with others.

5. **COLLABORATING**, although the most complex style of conflict resolution, is ultimately the method to adopt when possible. Its outcome generally causes both sides to win. Collaboration is one of the main tenets of "win-win" negotiations, by taking on the philosophy that "two heads are better than one." Characterized by high assertiveness and high cooperativeness, this style is best used for learning, integrating solutions, and merging perspectives. Digging into the issues, exploring them in depth, and confronting differences are components of this method to manage conflict. This style often results in increased commitments and improved relationships among involved parties. The distinct advantages to using the collaborating approach are that relationships are preserved for future interactions, and substantive outcomes may be achieved. This approach to dealing with conflict is the most challenging and perhaps takes the longest to negotiate. As such, the collaborating approach may be difficult in the time-pressured setting of the ED. However, ideal outcomes can be obtained if the willingness and the resources exist to pursue the collaborative method.

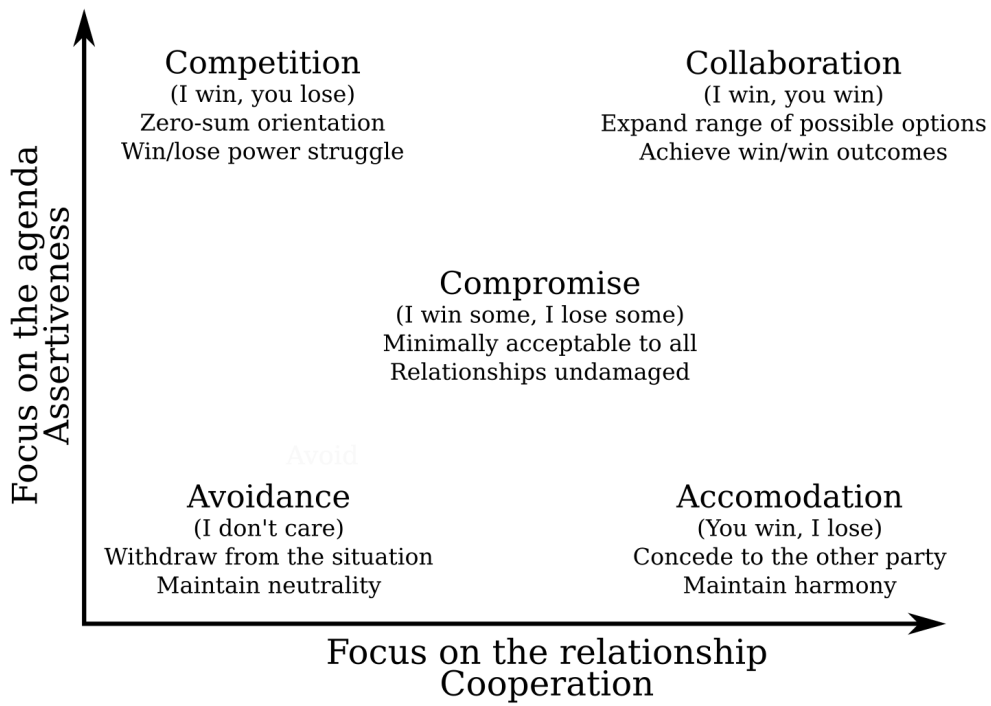


Figure 1

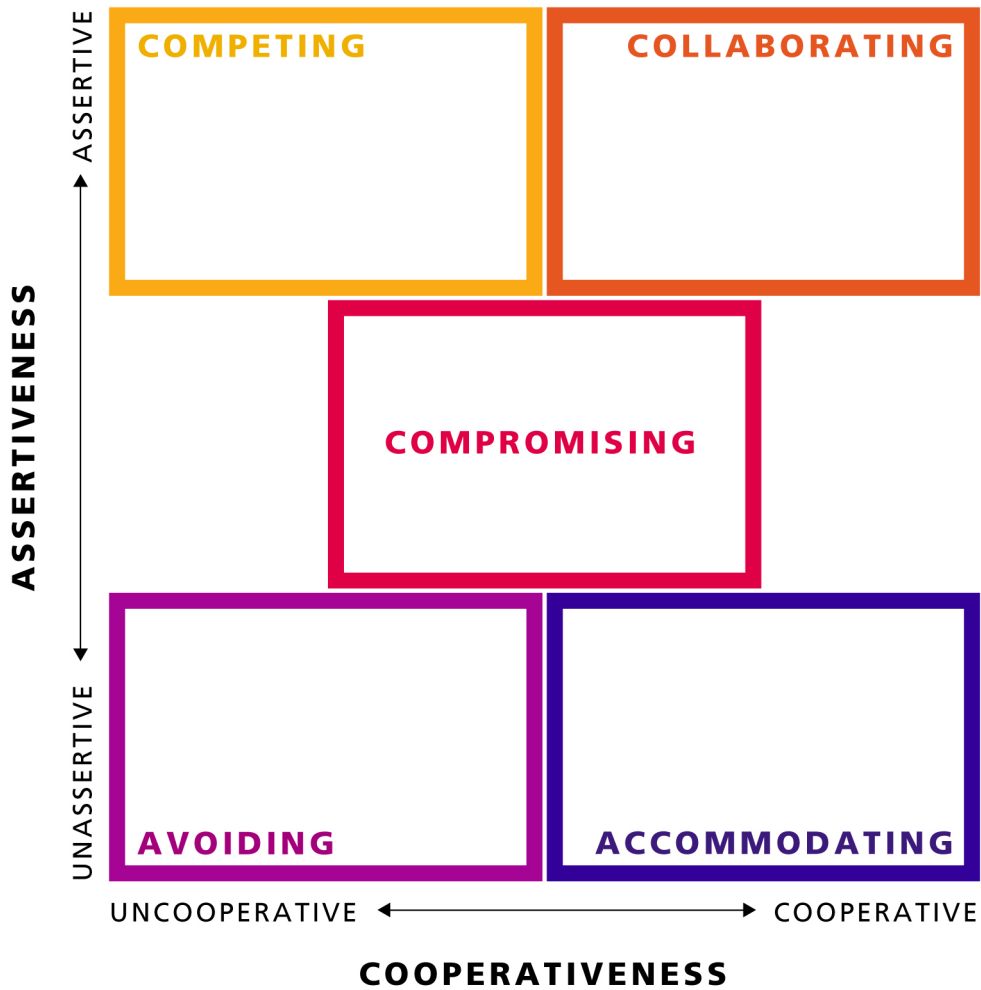


Figure 2

It is important to try and recognize:

1. What your default approach to conflict is.
2. The approach the 'opposition' is taking

This then means you can appreciate their perspective and try and use a different approach to what your default is. This is easier said than done but with some practice can be very helpful. Cultivating some skills in a few different approaches to conflict resolution can be very helpful.

Being flexible in our style of communication makes us better communicators and more likely to approach the situation of conflict with a lens of curiosity & mutual respect.

Marco and Smith Model of Conflict Resolution

Drs Marco and Smith developed a structured model for conflict resolution, specifically in the Emergency Department. Although these tips are also good general rules for life. This gives us a framework in which to approach conflict resolution.

1. Establish common goals (e.g., to deliver the best or most appropriate patient care possible in a patient-centered fashion).
2. Communicate effectively.
3. Do not take conflict personally.
4. Avoid accusations and public confrontations.
5. Compromise.
6. Establish specific commitments and expectations (e.g., who will see the patient, and at what time?).
7. Accept differences of opinion.
8. Use ongoing communications (invest in future interactions).
9. Consider the use of a neutral mediator for situations that are not working and become disruptive or emotionally problematic.
10. Be pleasant!

Detailed step wise approach.

1. Accept the existence of the conflict.
2. Focus on the big picture.
3. Separate the person from the problem.
4. Clarify and identify the nature of the problem creating conflict.
5. Deal with one problem at a time, beginning with the easiest.
6. Engage the respective parties in an environment of impartiality.
7. Listen with understanding and interest, rather than evaluation.
8. Validate issues and concerns.
9. Identify areas of agreement; focus on common interests, not on positions.
10. Attack data, facts, assumptions, and conclusions, but not individuals.
11. Brainstorm realistic solutions in which both parties benefit.
12. Use and establish objective criteria, when possible.
13. Do not prolong or delay the process.
14. Implement the plan.
15. Evaluate and assess the problem-solving process after implementing the plan (follow- up periodically).

Summary

- Having a robust approach to conflict resolution in the workplace is important to ensure patient care is not compromised, and employees are treated with respect.
- Different people have different ways of approaching conflict. Work out what your style is and try and understand the styles of others, as this will help you work more effectively with them.
- Conflict dealt with effectively can contribute to learning, growth and development.

References

1. Conflict Resolution in Emergency Medicine. Marco Catherine et al. *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. 2002;40:347-349
2. Conflict resolution in Emergency Medicine – Gus M. Garmel