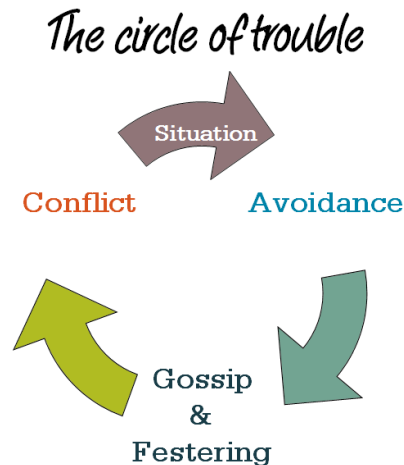


## Conflict Management

Monica Maxwell, SPHR, SHRM-SCP

Chances are your employees are afraid of conflict. Clinics that are conflict adverse often get themselves into what is called (and shown below as) **The Circle of Trouble** (cue dramatic music).



The majority of clinic culture issues stem from the circle of trouble; meaning, the majority of interpersonal issues that occur in your clinic are based on your staff's inability to directly communicate with one another. Why?

In 1951 Solomon Asch of Swarthmore College conducted a study in which an individual was placed in a room with seven other fake study participants and asked several simple questions (for example, 3+4=?). The group of seven had prior instructions on when to give the correct answer in unison and when to all give the incorrect answer. 75% of the real participants changed their correct answer to the incorrect one to match the group. This is known as the Asch Conformity Experiment.

What does this have to do with your clinic? Well, apparently, the core instinct for the majority of us is to belong. Belonging is important. We all have to conform to survive in the working world. That being said, belonging can also mean that we are unwilling to communicate directly and try to avoid conflict and conform at all costs.

So, how do we change what is a deep-bred instinct? Becoming a clinic that embraces healthy conflict is a long process that takes time and patience. Before embarking on this change in clinic culture, you must first examine if you and the clinic leadership are conflict adverse. If you are, you need to take steps to change as you are modeling bad behavior and losing credibility with your staff. Here are a few things to remember when the conflict involves you.

**Take a "time-out:"** Often when we are in a conflict we have a sense that it must be dealt with immediately. If you are feeling overly emotionally about the situation, dealing with it right away can

make you as a manager come across reactive. While it is important to acknowledge the conflict, in most cases it is acceptable to schedule some follow-up time in the next day or two. This gives you time to reflect on the conflict.

**Write down both sides:** The first step to reflecting is reviewing the situation objectively. This can be difficult when the conflict involves you, so a good practice is writing down both sides. Try to write down the facts of the different argument and not interject your personal opinions. Reviewing both sides in writing often gives clarity to the conflict and can even point out flaws in your own argument or approach.

**Think long-term and strategic:** You have to ask yourself, what you are trying to gain in regards to this conflict. If the answer is “to be right” or “to prove I am in charge” you have to ask yourself how that goal helps your standing as a manager and, most importantly, your clinic. Your goals should be centered on the wellbeing of your workplace as a whole.

**Practice the Conversation:** Often when we have something difficult to discuss we can get tongue tied, nervous, or even cry. Practicing in front of a mirror at home or with trusted friends is the best way to combat this. While it sounds silly, practice does REALLY make perfect.

**Don't create an alternate reality:** Sometimes managers will replay a conflict so often in their head they begin to add conversations or actions that did not happen. Essentially, they get themselves worked up based on a false alternate reality and then get more anger than necessary. Re-center your thoughts if you find yourself doing this and remind yourself of the facts. This behavior can cause you to come across over reactive.

Once you come to terms with your own conflict approach, you can then train your team to deal with issues head on. Here are important steps to take with your staff:

1. **Advise, but don't fix.** When your staff comes to you with a problem with a coworker (not including harassment and other significant issues) ask two questions:
  - a. What have you done already to address this issue?
  - b. What other ideas do you have to resolve this issue?

Having a brainstorming discussion around both these questions will empower your employees to address the issue on their own (and teach them how to deal with similar situations in the future). Schedule a follow-up to see how the situation evolved and follow-through. This will help you avoid larger issues later and also ensure the employee doesn't chicken out on dealing with the issue directly.

2. **Mediate, but don't fix.** When your staff cannot fix their problems on their own, sometimes mediation is needed. Mediation is **not** talking to one employee for the other. Mediation involves all parties sitting down and discussing the problem. Your job, as the mediator is to set ground rules, keep the conversation moving in a positive direction, and assist with brainstorming solutions.

3. **Have regular team meetings to discuss processes: what working and what's not.** Often, interpersonal issues will manifest themselves in breakdowns in processes. Encouraging your staff to regularly deal with process breakdowns will lead to larger discussions about how they are working as a team. Set guidelines to these meetings (no blaming language) and encourage the team to problem solve the issue.
  
4. **Model healthy conflict.** When you have an issue with a staff member, model good behavior.
  - a. Deal with the situation as soon as possible.
  - b. Have the discussion in private.
  - c. Be open to feedback about what may have gone wrong on your end (but don't shoulder the blame on your own).
  - d. Follow-through on commitments and expect your staff to do the same.