Exit stage left
Spot and stop workplace drama

By Brian Justice

While conflict can occur in any workplace, the stakes are especially high in a medical practice. Mergers, and complex regulatory and compliance issues, can make for stressful work environments. With the inclusion of different personalities and an increased emphasis on patient satisfaction and outcomes, creating a drama-free work environment can be a challenge.

"The impacts [of unaddressed staff conflicts] can reach far and wide: lawsuits, loss of good employees, cost to replace employees, [and] patient care disruption. Efficiency breaks down, communication stops, revenue decreases, and eventually, the practice loses patients," says Charlie Hauck, president of Growth Dynamics, a consulting firm that specializes in staff selection, development, and retention.[1]

Role call

While it may sometimes seem easier to dismiss the resulting issues, challenges should be acknowledged. Unaddressed conflicts simmer under the surface, suggests Joseph Grenny, coauthor of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High,* adding that "one of the primary reasons people leave a company is because of some chronic frustration."

Common sources of workplace conflict include the following[2]:

- Heavy workloads
- Lack of honesty and transparency
- Personality clashes between coworkers
- Poor leadership
- Stress
- Unclear roles

And yet, many people prefer to keep problems to themselves; Grenny writes that 95% of people struggle with approaching colleagues and managers about their frustrations.[3] Even in cases when managers address the situation, team members might feel uncomfortable speaking out or may try to downplay the situation.

Managers who avoid dealing with conflict will regret it later, and proactive leaders should follow several strategies for conflict resolution.[4]

1 Be mindful of timing

Timing is everything, especially when managing conflicts.[4] "The best time to take action is when there is hard evidence that an employee is negatively impacting the performance of others. Address problem behaviors as soon as they become known," says Berlene Farthing, CMA (AAMA), who recently retired as the manager of 11 specialty clinics affiliated with the Virginia Mason Medical Center, Federal Way Clinic in Federal Way, Washington. "When problems are not addressed in a timely fashion, or at all, [the lack of action] encourages repeated bad behavior."

2 Respect differences

Conflict is rarely black and white; and, as the workplace becomes more generationally and culturally diverse, learning to see different viewpoints can be crucial.[4] "Managers need to set a good example," says Farthing. "Develop a good rapport with employees, and get to know them on personal and professional levels. Treat all employees equally [and] with respect, and let them know you are there to support their success."

3 Acknowledge tension

"How [do you] spot potentially disruptive employees and colleagues?" asks Lisa Chenofsky Singer, a human resources specialist and business coach who works with primary care physicians merging practices and staffs ambulatory care sites. "By calling out the elephant in the room."

Leaders must confront tension head on and address conflict before circumstances get out of hand. If a situation is not dealt with, it creates greater tension that makes it more difficult to manage later.[4] "Being open about the implications of one's actions on the mood of the group can help [the group members] become more engaged and work together more effectively," Chenofsky Singer says.

4 Heed boundaries

Learn to recognize when lines are being crossed. Carefully observe and note behavioral tendencies that seem to trigger certain attitudes or demonstrate a lack of self-awareness.[4] "Ask questions and listen often," says Leslie Baker, the executive vice president of operations for Adjuvant.Health, powered by Allied Physicians Group, from Macon, Georgia. "Understand the employees' strengths and give actionable and measurable goals. Coaching, retraining, [communicating clearly], and, above all, being consistent and holding employees accountable are the basics for turning an employee around."

Set the stage

Establishing a work culture is key, says Baker. "Every organization must define [their] mission, vision, and values," she says. "Make sure they are relevant and true, know them, own them, and reinforce them in everything you do with your staff. Every leader in the office should be an example and use huddles and staff meetings to reinforce [these ideas]."

"I encourage every workplace to have a written code of conduct with something akin to an agreement that 'if I have a problem with you, I'll come to you. If we can't resolve it, I'll go to the assigned practice administrator,'" says Vivian Scott, a certified mediator and author of *Conflict Resolution at Work for Dummies*. "The key is having every staff member knowledgeable about this code up front. This puts the responsibility to watch for and manage conflict squarely on *everyone's* shoulders."

Break a leg

A LinkedIn survey[5] revealed that 57% of the business leaders surveyed believe that soft skills (e.g., creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, time management[6]) are more important to success than hard skills (e.g., specialized knowledge, technical abilities[6]). In a complex system that requires highly functioning teamwork, soft skills can be powerful tools in preventing negative patient outcomes caused by poor conflict management and other dysfunctions.

Farthing has successfully used such skills to deal with recalcitrant staff. She recalls an employee who frequently complained about a coworker. Farthing offered suggestions about how the employee might change her behavior to help the situation, but the problem seemingly resolved itself when the coworker left. However, the complaints began again shortly after that coworker's replacement began work. "Finally, I pointed out that the common denominator in the situation was *her* [the employee with complaints]," Farthing recounts.

Together, Farthing and the employee worked on looking at the circumstances that caused dissatisfaction in different ways and developing possible solutions. The employee was receptive and began to improve. "One day, she came to me to say how I changed her life in a positive way—at work *and* at home," remembers Farthing. "That made it an especially gratifying outcome."

The benefits of providing employees with procedures that combine established processes, common courtesy, and common sense far outweigh the cost of losing employees due to an unstable work environment. Furthermore, successful conflict resolution in the health care environment has both personal and professional benefits that can be measured in productivity, harmony, and, most importantly, patient outcomes. ✦

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That's the ticket

Staff and management in high-drama, chaotic workplaces pay the price in terms of peace of mind and stressful workdays, but there are real dollar-and-cent costs too:

- Stress at work costs U.S. businesses approximately $300 billion a year.[7]

- An estimated 1 million employees miss work every day because of stress, costing companies an average of $702 per employee annually.[8]

- Disengaged employees have 37% higher absenteeism, 18% lower productivity, and 15% lower profitability. When converted into dollar amounts, this disengagement costs 34% of an employee's salary (i.e., $3,400 for every $10,000 they make).[9]

- Employee turnover can be costly: replacing an employee costs as much as 33% of that worker's annual salary. For an employee earning $45,000 per year, that is $15,000.[10]