

Putting Out the Many Fires of Our Changing System.... Conflict Resolution Skills

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Q. Our office needs strategies to help deal with patients who are confused or angry over policies that must be followed. Any suggestions?

A. In the confusing healthcare environment in which we practice, conflict resolution skills are a vital component of effective management and customer service.

Conflicts arise in many situations and are manifested with many disguises. In the private practice setting, conflicts may arise if a patient shows up unexpectedly without an appointment or referral, if they show up early or late, if the doctor is running behind, or if they disagree or are confused over their bill. These conflicts may manifest with the emotions of *anger*, *frustration*, *rudeness*, or in some instances, simply *silence*.

Unresolved conflicts usually end in *disputes*. The most disturbing dispute for health care providers (and most commonplace in today's society) is *litigation*. Long before disputes arise however, a conflict will result in loss of goodwill, loss of the customer (and their potential referrals) and ultimately lost revenues.

It is extremely important to emphasize that the "art" of conflict resolution does *not* mean relinquishing your position and "giving in". Actually, it's the opposite. Effective conflict resolution involves a positive outcome, and will usually result in people respecting and assuming your position.

Most people have a typical response to a conflict. As humans, we have a strong desire to express our point of view. This involves lots of talking (sometimes very loud talking). We have a "position" and we want it heard. Occasionally, we become defensive. The other party however, also has a perspective and wants to be heard. They want **their** position acknowledged. This type of dialog usually results in what is known as "*positional based*" negotiation. Positional based dialog strives for "one winner" and "one loser". It's a win-lose technique.

Humans often have a strong desire to maintain their interests. By examining and understanding what these interests are, we can utilize them to resolve the conflict. If we examined the possible interests for each party in a hypothetical conflict, superficially it may seem as though a patient's interest in a conflict arising from an outstanding balance is to simply not pay the bill. While this may indeed be the case in some rare instances, it is likely more involved than that.

Possible patient interests:

1. Being heard...Simply a desire to feel that their interests are being validated.
2. Venting their frustrations. Their frustrations may be as a result of this particular crisis, or may have nothing to do with it.
3. A feeling of losing control.
4. Lastly (and probably rarely), a desire to not pay the balance.

Our interests:

To GET PAID with as little hassle as possible.

Again, in rare instances, the patient may have no other interests other than avoiding the payment. In many conflicts however, there are multiple layers involved. Once these other layers are addressed by listening, the demise of the conflict often quickly follows.

The key to conflict resolution is to negotiate using an “interest-based” system rather than one that is “positional-based”. Interest-based negotiation involves a “**win-win**” phenomenon. The interests of BOTH parties are addressed.

RESOLVING CONFLICT UTILIZING INTEREST-BASED NEGOTIATION:

If you are truly committed to resolving a conflict, you must start by identifying the interests of the other party. How do you accomplish this?

Through *empathic listening* you can begin to identify needs. This involves active listening (not talking) and trying to “feel” what the other person feels like. With this type of listening, emotions such as frustration, anger, fear of loss of control, etc. can be identified by the patient’s choice of words. These emotions must then be *acknowledged*. A person’s feelings are acknowledged when you are able to accurately *paraphrase* them back to the patient. A paraphrase given to a person who is frustrated might be “I know how frustrated this makes you feel; it drives me crazy as well when an insurance company doesn’t pay my doctors.” Paraphrasing opens the gates of communication since the patient now feels that they have been acknowledged and that you understand their concerns.

Allow them to vent all frustrations. The “listening to talking ratio” should be about 10:1.

Only after opening these gates of communication should you proceed to “tell your side of the story”. Choose your words carefully. Continue to speak in an empathetic tone and periodically interject those same emotions (how you know its frustrating, etc). DO NOT patronize.

If the patient hasn’t yet crossed over to your side, you may want to ask them what you can do to resolve this conflict. Again, listen...don’t talk. If the request is not realistic, again, state your case and try to provide a realistic solution.

In those rare instances in which a person’s interests remain unrealistic, it may be time to terminate the conversation. Ask the person if you can get back to them at a mutually convenient time to discuss this further. Disclose, for example, that you need to “review this case further”. Terminating the conversation at this point serves two purposes. It will allow some time for things to “sink in” for both parties. It will also give you some time to evaluate the potential decision and its consequences from an “analytical” standpoint. What might the financial impact be for standing firm on your position? The “risk/benefit ratio” must be explored. Perhaps not a popular view, but that ratio changes with each person. As a PERSON, everyone is valuable. But as a CUSTOMER, some are more valuable than others. There *are* times in which relationships need to be terminated for the benefit of both parties.

The next time that you find yourself in a conflict, remind yourself of these skills. Are you listening and trying to establish an understanding of the other party? Can you make them feel as if you have addressed *their* interests? When it’s time for you to discuss your position, are you continuing your empathetic tone? Lastly, attempt to predict the economic outcomes of all of your potential decisions.

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