



Conflict Is Not Always a Bad Thing

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Conflict. The word alone can result in physiologic changes such as perspiration and increased heart rate. People try to avoid conflict in many ways; however, conflict is not always a bad thing.

Conflict is a result of human interaction and an inevitable part of life that can be divisive, erosive, and destructive when ignored or handled poorly but can lead to problem solving, better solutions, and stronger relationships when managed effectively.^{1,2}

Different experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives make each person unique, which can lead to conflicts. However, this uniqueness also contributes to people's ability to work through difficult situations.²

Take Time & Effort

Conflict has the potential to add value to the team or tear the team apart. Beneficial or *good* conflict nurtures respectful dialogue that often results in creative, innovative, mutually agreed-upon solutions. On the other hand, negative or *bad* conflict, which occurs when team members focus on personal tensions, personalities, or egos, or cannot get past their dissimilarities,^{2,3} results in diminished productivity and reduced innovation. When mutually satisfying solutions cannot be agreed upon or disagreements become personal, the damage is more severe.

Getting to the root of the conflict takes every team member's time and effort, but finding the root cause is necessary for a successful resolution because often the most disparaging conflict stems from something deeper—a perceived incompatibility among team members. The diversity each team member brings to a strong team relationship is the same diversity that can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Team members should not ignore the conflict and hope it will disappear. Willing it away does not make it so, and a worsened, intensified situation will be the end result. As with untreated disease symptoms, if ignored, conflict will fester until the situation is out of control.⁴

Recognize Approaches Vary

As personalities are different, approaches to conflict vary. First, team members should become more aware of their own roles, responses, and reactions to others. To gain a better understanding of your own conflict management style, consider keeping a journal of conflict situations in which you are involved.

The 4 types of conflict personalities are^{1,2}:

- **Withdrawal:** Avoiding or retreating from conflict
- **Agreeable:** Deferring to the other person's point of view
- **Aggressive:** Trying to convince the other person you are right
- **Collaborative:** Working through issues to arrive at a mutually satisfying agreement

Self-awareness is an ideal first step to effective conflict management. After analyzing your response, do not be afraid to seek feedback from a trusted friend or mentor. Candidly and honestly reflect on his or her feedback. The ability to identify challenging people and situations and to analyze the cause of your

TAKE ACTION

- 1** Do not ignore conflict among team members—the situation may intensify and become uncontrollable.
- 2** Face and embrace disagreement, find the root cause, and manage it effectively—stronger working relationships and team bonds will result.

reaction to a situation or specific individual is extremely therapeutic.

Understand the Issues

Working through conflict involves gaining a clear understanding of the issues because arriving at a meaningful solution without considering the real cause of the conflict is difficult. Use these tips to help uncover the underlying reason for a conflict:

- Listen first, then share your point of view.
- Listen carefully, paraphrase, reflect, and seek understanding.
- Try to determine the root cause, such as lack of information or facts, conflicting goals and priorities, and differences in values.
- Express your views in terms of your needs and goals and avoid proposing your solution.
- Always communicate honestly, openly, and respectfully.
- Stick to the issue at hand.

Practice Processes

Every day, people deal with disagreement and conflict, which have the potential to make individuals and teams stronger,^{2,4} but the challenge is handling them in direct, constructive ways. Do not be an ostrich—putting your head in the sand and ignoring the conflict is not conflict management.² Instead, practice the following processes:

- Ask to meet with the other team member or members in a neutral place.

- Begin by defining the meeting's purpose and the goal of a mutually satisfying outcome.
- Use active listening to draw out information and determine the underlying source of the disagreement.
- Address the conflict directly and constructively, avoid disrespect and negative emotional reactions, and remain nonjudgmental.
- Investigate alternative solutions together.
- Commit to a solution together.

Conclusion

Intelligent, passionate people, such as those who make up veterinary healthcare teams, cannot and should not agree all the time. Effectively working through conflict can build stronger working relationships, encourage creative solutions, and strengthen the veterinary *team* feeling. Face and embrace conflict—it really can be a good thing. ■

References

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FUN FACT: Kara has a thing for flat noses—she has a French bulldog, a pug, a Persian cat, mini potbellied pigs, and miniature horses (the “flat nose” of the horse world).

Resource

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How Conflict Can Strengthen the Team

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Homestead Veterinary Practice holds weekly team meetings so team members can share ideas for improvements to practice protocols such as workflow efficiency and standard operating procedures.

Veterinary nurse Lisa pinpoints areas that she finds truly inefficient and presents solutions. Dr. Jean, an associate veterinarian, attends the weekly meetings but does not speak up and instead discusses inefficiencies and solutions privately with Greg, the practice manager.

Lisa believes Dr. Jean does not participate in the team meetings and engages one-on-one to get what she wants. She decreases her participation in the team meetings and becomes contentious when team members comment. “Why should I discuss any ideas,” Lisa asks, “when Dr. Jean just discusses what she thinks is right in private meetings?”

What is the conflict?

The Action

Greg explains that Lisa and Dr. Jean have differing personality types. Lisa is outgoing and extroverted and likes to discuss her ideas and solutions, whereas Dr. Jean is introverted and needs time to listen and reflect before providing her thoughts and solutions. However, because Dr. Jean is doing so privately with Greg, Lisa assumes (albeit incorrectly) that Dr. Jean has a hidden agenda to get her solutions incorporated into the workflow.



Greg asks every practice team member to take the Myers Briggs Type Indicator personality inventory. (See **Personality Profiles**.) At the next meeting, team members reveal their personality types and Greg leads a discussion on the meaning of each type and how the different types interact in the workplace.

The Result

This conflict strengthened the team by highlighting the need to understand how team members interact in the practice and presenting an opportunity to explore communication styles. The resolution of the conflict led to a place of understanding, an improved and more efficient work environment, and better patient care protocols. In this case, conflict was a *good* thing.

Personality Profiles

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- Using MBTI to understand & appreciate workplace differences. Stamp SS, Thoren J. *Veterinary Team Brief*. veterinaryteambrief.com/workplace-differences