

## **Conflict- The Untaught Class IV Malocclusion**

You are on top of the world and ready to conquer the universe, orthodontic certificate in hand. The future is bright and promising; nothing can keep you from accomplishing all that you set out to do 10 years ago when you started college. It is fairly easy to reach your goals in patient care; after all you were trained to provide outstanding orthodontic treatment. Then reality hits you square in the face, on a daily basis you have to deal with employee conflict. When did they offer 'Conflict 101' to prepare you for the responsibility of leading a successful team?

Let's look at some of the situations in your practice that might generate an unwanted source of conflict:

**Scheduling-** the doctor has requested a one hour banding appointment in one week and your next availability is not for four weeks. Why does the treatment coordinator keep on promising the patients that they can have all of their appointments after school? The chart is not filled out again, is the scheduling coordinator is supposed to be a mind-reader to know what the next appointment is.

**Doctor-** why can't everyone do what they are supposed to do, when they are supposed to do it and with a smile without complaining? Too often the Doctor goes to the chair to see a patient and has to go on a search to find a clinician to assist him/her. The Doctor has a luncheon meeting scheduled today with a referral office and the patient's records are not ready to take to the meeting.

**Clinical-** why are patients 'squeezed in at the end of the day or outside of the pre-blocked grid? Why does the front office team bring the patient back even though they know that the patient was 30 minutes late? They know that we do not see patients for emergency visits after school and once again they have put in four patients with loose brackets after 3:30. We asked for a 45 minute appointment and the patient was scheduled to do the entire procedure in 20 minutes.

**Treatment Coordinator-** no treatment plan, how am I supposed to do the consultation? Why did the Doctor continually quote the treatment fee? Once again she quoted a fee far less than the customary fee for the treatment. The Doctor is one the telephone again and a new patient has been waiting for 15 minutes.

It has been found that problems in most organizations are either technical or systemic, however establishments tend to identify most problems as people-related. Conflict often rears its ugly head when employees in different positions do not understand and appreciate the responsibilities associated with each other's jobs. If you have solid systems in place with the appropriate documentation to support protocols, conflict in the office will diminish.

There are three basic options for dealing with conflict:

1. Flight
2. Fight
3. Unite

Flight/fight option is a win/lose approach, a position based approach. With this approach there is always someone who loses, someone who does not feel good about the outcome of the conflict.

The clinical team complains to everyone other than to the front office team about the way patients are scheduled. The Doctor confronts the team in front of patients about the missing charts. The treatment coordinator sits back and sulks instead of calmly discussing the fee situation with the Doctor after patient hours.

Unite is a win-win approach, an interest based approach. Solutions are often found in a cooperative effort between the team members involved.

The two principles in the interest based approach are:

1. Treat conflict as a natural resource.
2. Respect people/attack problems.

The interest based approach consists of four steps:

1. Raise the issue- do not make it personal.
2. Discover interests- how does this affect all parties involved?
3. Generate options- freely discuss options, never put down or discredit someone's idea or opinion.
4. Develop mutual agreements- how can we turn this into a win-win for the entire team including patients?

To successfully raise issues to invite cooperation and stimulate creativity in coming up with mutually satisfying solutions, try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. How would you like them to approach you with the problem? Express your views without provoking. Attack the problem without blaming the other person. Separate the person from the problem, attack the problem and still respect the person. Start the resolution process focused on resolving the issue.

When conflict does occur in the office (as it often will on a daily basis), take the time to follow these steps to bring a positive resolution to the problem.

**Prepare:**

- Allow adequate time to take care of the problem, do not allow yourself to be rushed. Pick a time that allows for all parties involved to work through the process.

- Pick a private setting if possible. Put yourself in the other person's shoes to see how you would feel if the issue was raised to you in a public place.
- Take a deep breath to prepare yourself emotionally so that you will be calm. It is easier for both parties to stay focused on the issue if everyone remains composed and relaxed.

### **Put it on the table:**

- State the problem and why it is a problem Remember that you are stating this from your point of view.
- Be respectful, talk about the behavior, not the personality. Separate the person from the problem, do not attack the person.
- Speak for yourself. Use 'I' statements.
- Talk about the positive, not just the negative. 'Sandwich' the negative between two positives.
- Keep it brief. Only say it once, and then allow the other party to respond.

### **Invite cooperation:**

- 'Build the golden bridge.'- make it easy and attractive for them to work with you.
- Find ways to resolve the situation together.

### **Listen and learn:**

- Actively listen. As Dean Rusk best put it 'One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears- by listening to them.'
- Be patient and tolerant of different styles of communication.
- Use non-verbal or body language to show that you are listening. Make frequent eye contact, nod you head, keep your body turned towards the speaker.
- Ask questions, open ended and non-confrontational.
- Paraphrase and backtrack. Restate what the speaker has said in your own words.

- Summarize- restate the key points the speaker had made. The focus is to identify issues and resolve the problems, not attack the person.

When discussing an issue, do not raise your voice, shout or blame the other person. Whining and complaining is not allowed. Do not use negative body language such as rolling your eyes or crossing your arms. Never attack the other person.

**Some questions to help you explore the other person's interest might be:**

Why is this important to you?

What do you want to have happen?

What concerns do you have?

What problems are we trying to solve?

What needs to happen for you to feel satisfied?

What is the best-case scenario for you?

What do you think would happen if we do not agree?

What would you do if you were in my shoes?

**When you start the conflict resolution process**, reach a mutual understand of what the problem is. Try to identify possible causes of the problem. Generate alternative solutions to attack the problem, not the person and evaluate the alternatives. Decide on a mutually acceptable alternative, which is often a combination of ideas from both parties. Establish a plan to implement the solution and establish a deadline to implement the solution.

Looking again at the conflict with the scheduling coordinator, the problem is not that the Doctor and the clinical team are purposely trying to make life difficult for the front office team. The core problem is that there is a shortage of appointments in the time frame needed to accommodate the needs of the patients. Possible solutions might be to add an additional day to the schedule, re-format the schedule so that the appointments needed are readily available, hire an additional clinical assistant or clearly establish at the morning meeting available appointments so that the Doctor is aware of scheduling conflict before the patient is involved. Whatever solution is decided upon, it is imperative that a deadline is set to implement the changes. In addition, establish a future date to evaluate the outcome of solution. Was it adequate to take care of the concern or is additional change necessary?

The advantages of an interest based approach are:

1. The involved parties experience the process as fair.

2. The parties craft their own agreements.
3. There is a high degree of commitment to the agreements.
4. Improved understanding and mutual respect.
5. Less time and costs is required (typically less team turnover.)

It is important that you learn to have an understanding and appreciation for others. Generate opportunities to enhance team communication:

- Morning huddle
- Monthly team meetings
- Communication board
- Catch your teammates doing something right certificate
- Secret angel program
- Out of office seminars and retreats (Camp Cancun February 5 – 8, 2004)

Allow your team the freedom to take chances, develop their own ideas and follow their own insights. Encourage creativity. Teach your team that it is permissible to fail on occasion while trying something new. Encourage them when they fail, praise them for their effort.

Stop and think before you speak, words cannot be taken back once they have left your mouth. When it becomes crazy and stressful in the office the best solution is to smile and laugh, keep a positive attitude and deal with the present situation. At the soonest appropriate time find an interest-based solution. As Ambrose Bierce once said, 'Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.'

***About the author:***

*Debbie Best* is a senior practice management consultant and a co-founder of Consulting Network. She evaluates staffing needs and the office computer system to develop a strategic plan for practice productivity. Debbie designs customized schedules, personalized job descriptions, and a personnel manual to fit each practice's needs. As a part of her consulting program, Debbie also focuses on the role of the front desk team, financial controls, anti-embezzlement protocol and practice building. She is the author of the 'Front Line Training and Procedures Manual' and 'Comprehensive Hiring Packet.'

To Contact Debbie:

Phone- (925) 447-6993

Fax- (925) 447-6994

Website: [www.consultingnetwork.org](http://www.consultingnetwork.org)

E-Mail: [debbiebest@aol.com](mailto:debbiebest@aol.com)