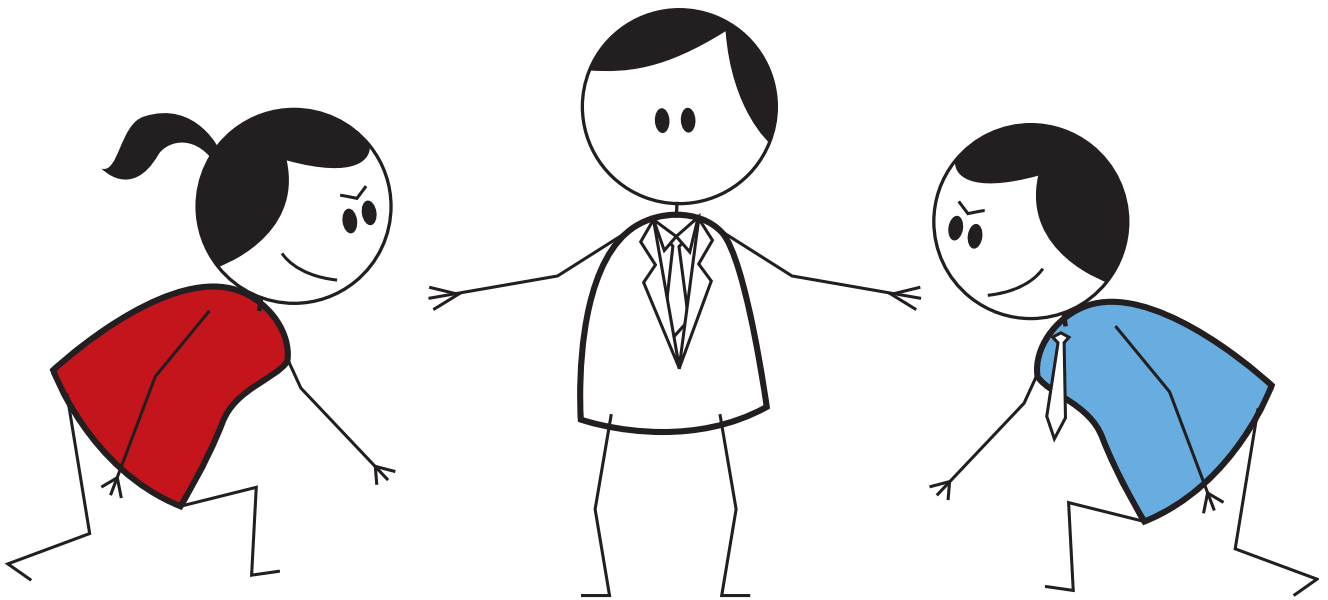




Minimizing Team CONFLICT



Conflict arises in every practice, but it does not have to create a negative situation. Conflict can be positive and productive if it presents the opportunity for different team members to voice their viewpoint, but when conflict is managed ineffectively, the poor work environment that results can negatively affect team members, client service, and patient care.

A practice team that works well together without conflict is ideal, but unrealistic. To maintain a well structured working environment and help minimize team conflict, practice leaders should set employee standards that every team member reviews, communicate regularly and effectively, and treat the team with respect and concern.

What causes conflict?

Understanding why conflict arises is the first step toward achieving practice harmony. Reasons for turmoil among the team include¹:

- **Poor management:** Lack of standard operating procedures and understanding of practice roles
- **Lack of respect:** Differences in morals, values, and personal perspectives
- **Poor or lack of communication skills:** Ineffective and/or insensitive approaches, projection of personal feelings, personality differences, differences in views and/or goals, and cultural differences
- **Unresolved resentment and negativity:** Feelings of hopelessness, feelings influenced by past experiences, inability to see change, and unwillingness to look from different perspectives

- **Self-criticism:** Low self-confidence and poor comparisons with others
- **Previous experiences:** Failure in personal relationships or employment
- **Fear or reluctance to express true feelings:** Feeling threatened by coworkers or employers, worrying about bad reactions, fearing reprisal, feeling insecure, being afraid to speak freely, and expecting negative consequences
- **Fear of judgment:** Inaccurate assumptions, reading between the lines, and ignoring the facts.

Knowing that it is human nature to allow emotions to cloud and influence every aspect of life is the most important component of effectively managing employees.

A practice team that works well together without conflict is ideal, but unrealistic.

6 Steps to Conflict Prevention²

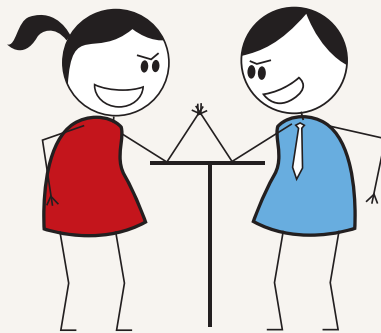
- STEP 1.** Establish written expectations for all team members.
- STEP 2.** Develop an easy-to-understand written protocol for difficult issues or grievances.
- STEP 3.** Communicate through regular, consistent team meetings.
- STEP 4.** Communicate with individual team members twice a year to discuss performance, concerns, and suggestions.
- STEP 5.** Consider conflict resolution team training by an outside expert.
- STEP 6.** Establish written procedures, including corrective measures, for any conflict that does arise.



Prevention is key

With so much opportunity for conflict to infiltrate the workplace, prevention is key. Designing and implementing clear protocols and expectations, as well as communicating regularly with the team, as a group and individually, can help reduce problems.

Keeping Conflict to a Minimum...



TEAM LEADERS SHOULD:

- ✓ Provide written expectations for team members
- ✓ Establish written protocols
- ✓ Communicate with all team members.

TEAM MEMBERS SHOULD:


- ✓ Contribute to discussions at team meetings
- ✓ Communicate concerns and offer suggestions to management
- ✓ Participate in conflict minimization and resolution training.

EVERYONE SHOULD:

- ✓ Respect every team member
- ✓ Make suggestions and actively participate in making the practice a good place to work
- ✓ Understand that all views are valid and should be heard
- ✓ Communicate effectively and regularly without allowing personal feelings to influence discussions
- ✓ Avoid criticizing him or herself or others (people make mistakes, and working it out can help foster growth as individuals and as a team)
- ✓ Encourage input from others when expressing personal feelings
- ✓ Speak up (do not be afraid to put personal opinions out there!)
- ✓ Help the team be open, effective, and fun, which will minimize conflict.

Keeping morale high and conflict low is work in itself, but providing rules of conduct that the team reviews and understands and establishing an easy-to-follow process to address problems that do arise can prevent any conflict from escalating. Even a simple form that team members use to communicate concerns to management, followed by a meeting to discuss the issue, can be effective.

Regular meetings in a relaxed, sharing environment in which the team can discuss practice business, team protocols, and any concerns relating to the well-being of the practice are critical. Because some team members may not feel comfortable communicating concerns in group gatherings, check in with individuals regularly (eg, monthly, semiannually) to address performance and potential concerns. When conflict escalates, effective procedures with appropriate corrective actions are necessary.

Making team members feel their opinions and concerns are valued helps boost confidence and job satisfaction, which, along with fair benefits and rewards, helps reduce turnover and conflict alike. 

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.