

GOT CONFLICT? WANT HARMONY?

By Mary O'Neill

We Can Help!

Many dentists don't know how to deal effectively with the inevitable relationship challenges that arise among staff members in every dental practice. A number of doctors say they were warned about this in dental school, yet didn't believe it until they encountered the challenge firsthand.

"Why can't I just do dentistry?" a beleaguered dentist might ask.

If you want your practice to thrive, you not only need to provide excellent patient care, you also need to make your practice a great place to work. That means knowing how to build great working relationships and how to effectively communicate and resolve conflict.

Unfortunately, if you're like most dental professionals, you've probably had little training in this area. When you went from school to running a practice – or being part of a team – you likely brought with you the same set of skills you learned at home. That could be good or bad news for you, depending on the family you grew up in! Over the years, you may have noticed unhelpful communication patterns taking root, yet rather than leave your comfort zone and deal with them, you settled for discord instead.

As Dr. Phil might ask, "How's that working for you?"

Chances are you've made some of the mistakes listed in this article. If so, welcome to the human race! Everyone makes mistakes. The key is to learn from them. It's never too late to change and acquire a new set of skills. No matter how long you've experienced team conflict, you can still create a harmonious, emotionally healthy work environment by learning about these common pitfalls and avoiding them from now on.

Mistake # 1: Not Recognizing the Early Warning Signs of Team Conflict

Unresolved conflict causes contraction; its presence is

palpable. People tend to either pull in or lash out. The most frequent early signs of tension are: rolling of eyes, shrugging of shoulders, silence at meetings, angry tone of voice, rude behavior, gossip, and sarcastic, negative, or critical remarks. These are all indirect ways of communicating something's not working. In later stages, teams become divided, backstabbing can occur, and absenteeism and turnover increase.

What can you can do? Address the issue! If you sense your team is in conflict, let them know you're aware of it and then schedule time to talk. Tell team members how much you value harmony and ask if they do too. If so, point out recent actions don't appear to be in line with those values and speak about the specific behaviors you've noticed. Emphasize stress levels can soar and productivity can plummet if you don't agree to work through the issues.

Remember "*What you allow, you teach.*" What do you want to teach your team?

Mistake # 2: Avoiding Conflict

Many people feel ill equipped to deal with conflict so they avoid it all together rather than risk intervening and possibly making matters worse. This is one of the biggest mistakes dental professionals can make because not dealing with

conflict can drain a practice of its energy, patients, and staff.

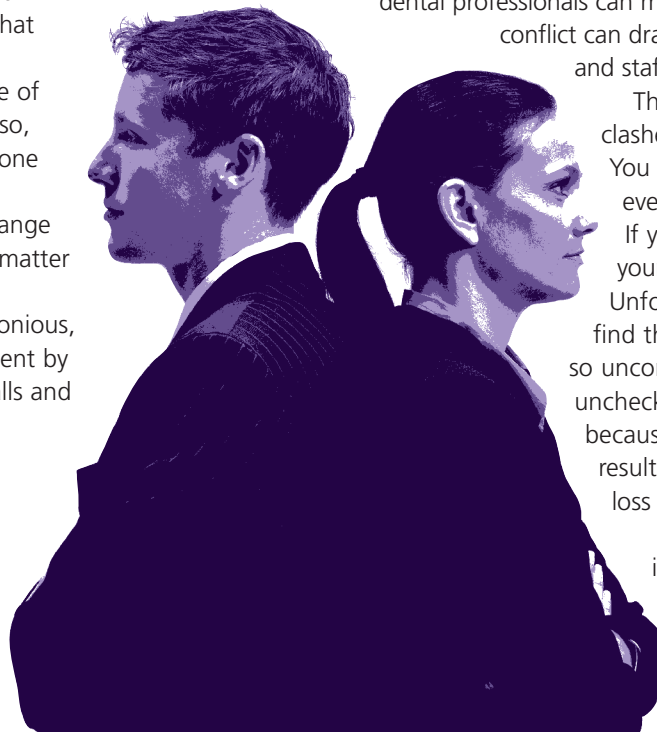
Think about the last time your needs clashed with another team member's.

You may have given in, given up, or even compromised to keep the peace.

If you resort to that strategy repeatedly, your needs won't ever get met.

Unfortunately, some dental professionals find the thought of confronting conflict so uncomfortable they prefer to leave it unchecked. Tension inevitably mounts because needs continue to go unmet, resulting in more confusion, stress, and loss of teamwork and productivity.

What can you do? Talk about it! The greatest advantage of addressing conflict – provided it's



continued on page 2

continued from page 1

done skillfully – is lines of communication re-open and underlying unmet needs become clearer. That's the only way to get to the heart of what's troubling everyone and begin the process of finding the right solution.

Since starting the conversation seems to be the biggest obstacle to resolving conflict, finding the courage to broach the subject is the first step. Skill building is next.

Mistake #3: Not Understanding the High Cost of Conflict

According to researcher Daniel Dana, "Unresolved conflict represents the largest reducible cost to business, yet it remains mostly unrecognized."

Experts estimate unresolved conflict can cost your business hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars a year. Thirty percent of your office manager's time can be spent handling inter-personal conflict. Turnover is significantly higher in practices where conflict remains unresolved; and recruiting, hiring, and training someone new can cost up to 150% of the replaced employee's salary.

What can you do? Learn about it! Conflict not only spoils relationships and erodes productivity, it can also have a profound impact on your bottom line if it's felt by patients. The last thing you want is to have staff conflict spill over into the operatory or waiting room! So it behooves everyone to get a handle on the situation.

Commit to investing a certain amount of time on personal and professional development. It's smart business practice to help build your team's interpersonal competencies. By doing so, every team member plays a role in restoring peace, maintaining productivity, and creating a healthy work environment.

Mistake #4: Not Recognizing the Value Conflict Offers

Conflict is a normal, natural, healthy reaction that occurs simply because people are different. Everyone on your team experiences different feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Each has his or her own interests and needs. Given how closely dental team members work together, eventually differences will clash. It's inevitable.

What can you do? Discover the hidden gift of conflict. Conflict can actually be very constructive. It can lead to greater unity, cooperation, collaboration, and often new and better ways of doing things and pave the way for higher functioning relationships, improved morale, and greater productivity and profitability.

You might discover, for example, that reviewing the schedule several times throughout the day – rather than only once at huddle – greatly reduces stress and improves workflow, especially when emergency patients are scheduled. Or perhaps a previously avoided conversation finally reveals the need for more cross training to facilitate greater teamwork.

Mistake #5: Not Having a System in Place to Resolve Conflict

At some point, you can count on conflict surfacing within your practice. Magical thinking won't change that. Yet everyone

on your team can learn to deal with conflict more effectively. The key to strengthening workplace relationships is equipping team members with the right tools and making sure they use them.

What can you do? Since conflict is a mind-body experience, great self-management tools are needed. To better handle the emotional reactions that accompany conflict, every team member needs to heighten awareness of his/her own stress cues. You can't create peace in an office if you can't find it in yourself.

The next step is to find a problem-solving model that's easy for everyone to understand and implement. An "Attention to Needs Model" can be very effective in encouraging open, honest communication and in helping team members to identify their needs, the needs of others, and the feelings that surround them. The goal is to arrive at a mutually satisfying solution and, ultimately, restore harmony.

Having team members sign a "Conflict for Resolution Contract," in which everyone agrees to follow a certain protocol, can also be helpful in getting everyone on the same page and ensuring greater compliance.

The bottom line? You **can** vastly improve your chances of having greater peace and harmony by learning about, and taking steps to avoid, these five most common mistakes. You **can** create an emotionally healthy work environment where your people, patients, and practice thrive!



Mary O'Neill, MA, MFT, is a speaker, trainer, consultant, and founder of Great Dental Teams, a professional development company which offers programs in the areas of conflict resolution, leadership development, and team building for dental professionals. FMI: www.GreatDentalTeams.com, mary@greatdentalteams.com, or 415.488.1805.

Testimonial

"Collection Services offered by Trojan has proven to pay for itself, as their handling of our patients overdue debt certainly motivates the bill payer, knowing that their credit will be affected. Well worth the annual fee (nominal) for this service."

– Beth Herrick, Office Manager

Trojan Today provides a forum for industry professionals to offer a diversity of information and to provide ideas and suggestions in the area of practice management. These articles are meant to be informative and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Trojan Professional Services, Inc.