Resolution of Conflict in the Pathology Laboratory

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Definition of conflict

• ‘A situation in which two or more people cannot agree on the actions that one person takes or that he or she does not want the other to take’  
  
  Edelmam & Crain

• According to Kenneth Thomas, most definitions of conflict share three themes:
  
  – Perceived incompatibility of interests
  – Some interdependence of the parties
  – Some form of interaction between the parties
Understanding conflict

Conflict is rooted in beliefs that people hold about their own behaviour and behaviour of others...influence individual beliefs and through beliefs actions to a conflict situation.

Individual’s...
experience
feelings
values
culture
background...

Professional-based differences in the scope of practice between anatomical and chemical pathologists may lead to tension and conflict situations.
Conflict is inherent to the workplace

Conflict is unavoidable and always a distraction with potential negative or positive consequences

- Destructive process
  - Reduces productivity
  - Destroys trust & morale
  - Counterproductive
  - Increases intensity and frequency of conflict
  - Increases cost

- Constructive process
  - Enhances growth & skills
  - Fosters relationships
  - Promotes creative solutions & competitive edge
  - Involvement of key parties
  - Mutually beneficial solutions & positive change

Balanced approach essential
The cost of conflict

• **Direct costs**
  – Legal fees; severance pay
  – Recruitment & training of new staff
  – Inefficiencies: missing deadlines; reduced quality of work

• **Indirect costs**
  – Reduced motivation and morale; absenteeism; lack of commitment and focus; reputation; missed opportunities
  – Distracted management

**Physician executives spend at least 20% of their time to deal with conflict in the workplace!**
Efficient management of conflict is necessary

‘Conflict management skills are essential in the portfolio of an effective physician executive and will become even more critical as complexity and urgency trigger more discomfort and fear among the diverse contributors to the health care industry’

Aschenbrener & Siders, 1999
Conflict in the Laboratory

• Conflict is a highly topical subject with extensive literature, resources and training opportunities
• Relatively limited information and resources related to health care environments
• Lack of research and published information related to the pathology environment

Managers and staff must acquire and develop basic skills to apply in the laboratory workplace
Dimensions of conflict

- Four dimensions of conflict:
  - Intensity
  - Duration (acute; subacute; chronic; unknown)
  - Issues: determine
    - something you want or want to avoid
    - something you have and want to keep
    - some belief you hold
    - some action you want or do not want to take
  - Relationships (peers; people supervised; authorities)

Aschenbrener & Siders, 1999
Conflict evolves along increasing themes of intensity, with frequency inversely proportional to intensity.
Low to mid intensity conflict

- Disagreement; clash of personalities & styles; chronic hostility
  - Very common in pathology workplace
  - Undermines productivity
  - Disruptive & counterproductive
  - Demoralising & reduces job satisfaction

- Tendency to avoid the conflict with subsequent increased intensity
  - Density (number of people involved) of conflict situation
Conflict & relationships

- **Peers**
  - Balancing workload, teaching and research; budgets; rosters; space; poor performance.

- **People supervised**
  - Residents; students; workloads; quality of work; poor performance; resistance to change behaviour

- **Authority figures**
  - ethical issues; discrimination; lack of trust; micromanagement; remuneration; values; workloads; providing resources.

*Important to understand that power and positional differences between the various relationship categories determine the dynamics in disputes and the most appropriate approach to resolve the conflict situation*
Conflict management

• “...the use of strategies and tactics to move all parties towards resolution, or at least containment of the dispute, in a manner that avoids escalation and destruction of the relationship”

• 5 modes:
  1) Collaboration
  2) Avoidance
  3) Accommodation
  4) Compromise
  5) Competition

Thomas & Kilman
Thomas explained the 5 modes in a two dimensional comparison of cooperation and assertiveness

Competition: Win / loose

Collaboration & joint problem solving: Win / win

Compromise: Win some / loose some

Avoid: Loose / loose

Accommodate: Loose / win
Conflict management modes

• All the modes have appropriate and inappropriate applications and one or more may be most appropriate for a particular conflict situation.

• Laboratory managers dealing with conflict management should be skilled in:
  – Selection of best mode in a particular situation
  – Adaptation of the mode to circumstances
Collaboration / Joint problem solving

- Key mode to manage important conflicts – win / win
- Enhances understanding of complex issues; creative solutions; consensus on implementation of actions
- Strengthens relationships and leads to future cooperation and sustainable change

When

a) The issues and relationships are important
b) Creative solutions and sustainable outcomes are required
c) There is adequate time to understand all the issues
d) Skills to explore new options and consensus are available
Top management decides to automate your laboratories, consolidating most routine tests in chemical pathology, haematology, immunology and serology.

Strong objection from laboratory staff who fear loss of identity, cross training, and potential deployment or retrenchment.

Conflict: Complex issues; important to foster relationships. Resolution requires involvement of many role players who are committed to achieve a sustainable outcome.

Resolution by JPS: Establish a representative task team to develop an implementation plan for automation of the laboratories. The task team must have a clear mandate, a realistic deadline for submission and must be accountable for the plan.
Competition / Forcing

• Conflict is a contest: you either win or loose
  – compete or force an outcome to secure own position
• May damage relationships and may compromise acceptance of the outcome

When

a) Urgent issue & insufficient time to implement JPS
b) Limited resources e.g. remuneration; research grants; specimen flow; staff positions; new equipment
c) Compliance with high stakes e.g. budget deadlines; examinations; informed consent; policies; legal issues
d) Other party insists on a competitive approach
One of your residents repeatedly submits assignments that contain plagiarism. The resident admits to plagiarism, promises to discontinue the practice, and attends a remedial course on plagiarism.

However a few months later the same resident again submits an assignment that contains plagiarised material.

Conflict involves blatant violation of institutional policies and international standards pertaining to plagiarism.

Resolution by forcing disciplinary action against the resident is appropriate and essential to comply with standards of practice, although it will seriously damage the relationship between you and the resident.
Avoidance

• Parties not prepared to risk potential loss
• Lack of resolution with subsequent escalation of conflict intensity and source of new conflict – loose / loose

When

a) Issues and relationships are unimportant
b) Time is limited and a decision is not necessary
c) Winning is not possible
d) Buying time to rethink the issue or to obtain additional information may facilitate resolution and collaboration
Anatomical and Forensic Pathologists have different requirements for a new shared electron microscope, a limited budget and limited time to make a decision.

FP require a facility to investigate residue in gun shot wounds.

AP require a high resolution TEM not ideal for FP needs.

AP and FP avoid continuous discussion of the conflict and appoint two experts to investigate a potential solution.

FP discover that a EM unit specialising in industrial applications at the Faculty of Engineering could effectively address their needs.

Temporary avoidance of conflict resolved the situation through reconsiderance of the issues and additional information.
Accommodation

• Subordination of own interests in favour of protecting the relationship – loose / win

When

a) The issues are significantly more important to the other party

b) You do not have the power to influence the outcome and do not want to obstruct the other side

c) Proactive accommodation in minor conflict situations can strengthen relationships
Anatomical Pathologists and Haematopathologists in your practice do not agree on the specifications of:
* a new digital camera for their shared photomicroscope
* a new flow cytometer for the shared FC unit

HP use the digital camera much less than AP - proposed new camera would meet their requirements anyway.

**HP agree to AP preference for a camera**

AP subsequently agree to support the HP preference for a new flow cytometer, used mainly by HP. HP agree to upgrade software to optimise the system for AP applications.

**Resolution by proactive accommodation of a minor conflict strengthens the relationship between AP and HP**
Compromise

• Parties prepared to make some trade-off and to settle for some of what they want – lose some / win some.
• May not resolve underlying conflict and may miss the opportunity to pursue JPS to achieve an outcome that is better than the position of any of the parties.

When

a) Cooperation is important but limited resources / time
b) A deadlock must be avoided even if the solution is not ideal
c) An interim arrangement regarding complex issues can allow collaboration while conflict is resolved.
Expansion of your laboratory practice leads to a significant increase in the number of routine specimens in the core laboratory.

There is conflict between laboratory management and technologists regarding limited resources to deliver the service.

Technologists agree to an increased workload for a few months in anticipation that the expected increased revenue would enable management to expand the resources and staff to a satisfactory level.

Resolution by interim compromise regarding complex issue allows collaboration / JPS and continuation of service while the conflict is resolved.
What have we achieved thus far?

- Defined conflict & emphasised its importance in pathology laboratory
- Dimensions of conflict especially
  - Intensity
  - Relationships
- Approaches to efficient conflict management
  - 5 modes

How do we resolve conflict situations?
Resolution of conflict often depends on the process and how parties treat each other: the 3 P’s

- **Problem / issues**
- **Process** – how discussion occurs
- **People** – how parties treat their relationships
# Importance of conflict issues vs relationship

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<td>Yes</td>
<td>JPS</td>
<td>Competition / forcing</td>
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Positional approach

1. Identify role players & needs
2. Describe conflict situation
3. Create options for mutual benefit
4. Evaluate options

Diagnostic approach & tools

5. Separate people from problem
6. Commit to solutions
7. Finalise agreement

Joint problem solving (mutual gains)
Diagnostic Tool for Conflict Management*  

A. Critical information  

a. Define conflict situation  
   i. Describe the problem – take a history!  
   ii. Identify all stakeholders including those that will be affected by the outcome – even patients!  
   iii. Identify and agree on specific issues for discussion  

*Aschenbrener & Siders, 1999
Diagnostic Tool for Conflict Management

A. Critical information

b. Organization factors
   i. What policies may guide resolution of conflict?
      • SOP’s for Safety; QA; security; procurement; HR; COE
   ii. What environmental factors or working conditions may influence the conflict?
      • Financial problems; new competitors; new laboratory management; poor QA performance
      • Increased workload; changes in overtime or shifts; inadequate equipment.
Diagnostic Tool for Conflict Management

A. Critical information

c. Personal factors
   i. May have a detrimental effect on conflict conversations
      • Values; stress; religion
      • Anger management

Understand your response to the anger of others and know what can “trip your trigger”
B. Assess the situation by asking the right questions

a) Whose problem is it?
b) How does my behaviour influence the conflict?
c) What issues can I change?
d) What are the constraints?
e) What matters most to me / the other party in this conflict?
f) What is at stake for me / the other party in this conflict?
C. Act effectively in a direct approach to conflict resolution

a) Focus on the most important issues – short list points
b) Define the conflict in terms of a problem that needs a solution, not as a threat that calls for attack!
   • Encourage creative joint problem solving
c) Acknowledge feelings – LISTEN
d) Ask for specific behaviour change - everybody should understand the desired change and be able to see the difference it could make
e) Be clear about what you are prepared to do
Diagnostic Tool for Conflict Management

• LOVE
  ✓ Listen without interrupting
  ✓ Observe
  ✓ Verify information - focus on mutual interests
  ✓ Empathy
Conflict management as process

• “the action-orientated, multi-tasking work mode of physicians is often at variance with effective conflict management, which is a process not an event”

  Aschenbrener & Siders

• Many health professionals including pathologists received limited or no training in the skills of conflict management

• Frequently deal with conflict by avoidance = undesirable outcomes
Conflict management as process

- Improve skills to manage conflict:
  - Use a diagnostic approach to assess conflict
  - Develop and practice listening skills
    - Active listening
    - Paraphrasing
  - Use established tools e.g. conflict management checklist
  - **Practice** the 5 modes of conflict with a trusted colleague
Conflict management as process

Conflict management is a learned skill akin to playing a musical instrument: with repeated practice, one can ‘play’ increasingly more complex ‘pieces’ but still falls off quickly without practice.

Aschenbrener & Siders
References


