

## WORKSHOP 3: Resolving Conflict in the Workplace

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Stephanie Barnard is a communications consultant, trainer, and author. Her workshop focused on the importance of communication skills in resolving conflict in the workplace.

### Conflict in the Pharmacy Workplace

What causes conflict in the pharmacy workplace? Heavy workloads, perceptions that the workload is not equitably distributed. Vacation and leave schedules. Personality conflicts. The need to do more with less. Pressure for perfection. Misunderstandings stemming from cultural differences. And that's just to name a few.

The reasons for conflict are varied. Most types of conflict are common to many settings; however, other types are distinctive. Regardless of the source of the conflict, managers must accept two realities. The first is that conflict is a constant in the workplace. Second, since conflict is inevitable, a strategy for dealing with it is essential.

### Common Sources of Conflict

1. Differing levels of responsibility
2. Limited resources
3. Conflicts of interest
4. Communication barriers
5. Interdependency
6. Competition (for space, for promotions, etc.)

### Communication as a Conflict-Resolution Technique

By following some basic principles of communications, pharmacy leaders can ensure that others better understand them and that they better understand others. These principles are as follows:

**Speak positively, be specific, and be aware of tone of voice.**

Avoid negative words such as "but." Avoid "ums" and other breaks in thought. Be specific. Say "I'll get back to you before 3 today," rather than "I'll get back to you." Intonation can belie words, especially on the phone. Sarcasm is easily misinterpreted.

**Listen to understand.** Make eye contact with the speaker. Smile and acknowledge what is said. Paraphrase what you've heard to confirm your understanding and demonstrate that you've been listening. Interrupt only to clarify a point, not to add your own.

### Five Challenges

During the workshop, Barnard periodically issued a challenge to participants who wanted to improve their communication skills. The challenges were as follows:

1. Meet and greet. On a regular basis, visit an office or unit in the hospital and introduce yourself to staff. Match faces with names.
2. Speak to everyone you see, even in the elevator.
3. Practice not using any "ums" in casual conversation for two weeks. Then try it during more formal occasions, such as meetings and presentations.
4. Make eye contact. When speaking before a large group, divide it into quadrants and focus consecutively on someone in each quadrant.
5. Listen to and analyze your own recorded voice-mail messages from time to time. Make sure they are clear and concise. Then transfer these techniques to face-to-face encounters.

**Learn how to persuade.** Sales people are consummate persuaders, but everyone needs to be persuasive in daily interactions with others. If it's time to sell an idea, begin by asking questions. This will help establish rapport. The questions should also enable you to establish a need. When you present your idea, do it with the listener's perspective in mind. Tell the listener what he or she will gain by accepting your proposal. In closing the deal, make a call to action or secure a commitment. Say, for example, "Okay, if I agree to talk to Dr. Jones about **xx**, will you promise to **xx**?"

### Coping with Upset People and Complaints

When someone is upset, the best advice for the listener is remain silent for a while and give the person a chance to talk. Never interrupt or become defensive. Next, summarize what the person has said. Third, make it clear that the given offense or act was not intentional. Finally, offer a solution that gives the person a choice. For example, if a patient has complained about having to return to the pharmacy because a prescription was misfilled, a pharmacist could say, "I'm sorry you had to come back, and I apologize for our error. Now, would you like to us to fill your prescription while you wait, or should I call you when it's ready tomorrow?"

Dealing with complaints involves a similar strategy. Thank the complainant and emphasize that you and the other pharmacists learn a great deal from complaints. Apologize and promise to deal with the situation immediately. Collect the data you need to resolve the issue and initiate corrective action. Finally, call the person who lodged the complaint to explain how it has been resolved.

## **Conclusion**

The communications strategies suggested by Barnard are common-sense, everyday guidelines. Appropriately used, they can help resolve as well as prevent conflict.