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# Conflict resolution: a guide for the foundation year doctor

## Introduction

Conflict is bound to arise in a huge organization like the NHS, where many individuals with different thoughts, ideas and aspirations work together. Conflict is usually looked upon quite negatively as it creates an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and unhappiness, making the working environment difficult. However, conflict can help to bring some important issues to the surface, or help to recognize hard feelings that might prevail among fellow colleagues.

Conflict can, in fact, lead to new ideas and approaches that help the organization to work better. A constructive way of resolving conflict sometimes helps in understanding each other and improving relationships, leading to better team working. In a large organization like the NHS, the need for a robust conflict resolution team is becoming more important day by day.

## How does conflict arise?

You may encounter disagreements among colleagues, managers or even sometimes patients. This could involve issues such as:

- The on-call rota
- Numbers of patients seen
- Case-mix of patients seen
- Timings of commitments such as clinics (some doctors may finish later than others)
- Who is always the one who sees the first and the last patients.

There may be disagreements with managers on pay scales, increments or promotion.

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Conflict may arise from various sources and mainly falls into three categories (Varney, 1989):

- Communication factors
- Structural factors
- Personal factors.

Communication barriers include poor listening skills, differences in perceiving and interpreting information or insufficient sharing of information. This could be a potential basis of misunderstanding and thus a cause of conflict. Structural disagreement includes lack of resources, reward systems and level of interdependence among staff members. Lastly, personal factors include an individual's self-esteem, personal goals, values and needs. Interplay of all these factors plays a major role in building up conflict.

## How do we resolve conflict?

Any conflict, whether big or small, should be taken seriously. Small conflict should be dealt with before it escalates into a bigger issue and spins out of control. There are five generally accepted styles of resolving conflict which can be used in different situations (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974):

1. Competitive style – a person tries to take a firm stand and makes a decision. This style is useful in an emergency situation when a decision has to be made quickly.
2. Collaborative style – a person tries to meet the needs of everyone involved in the conflict. They cooperate and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when bringing in a variety of viewpoints and getting the best solution to resolve the conflict.
3. Compromising style – a person tries to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. This style is used when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and some form of decision has to be made.
4. Accommodating style – this indicates willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. Accommodation is appropriate when peace is more valuable than winning.

5. Avoiding style – someone uses this style to evade conflict completely. This style is useful when the controversy is trivial and the person does not want to hurt anyone's feelings.

The approach you use varies depending on the situation. Nelson (1995) described various approaches that include:

- Direct approach, which involves confronting the issue head-on. Although uncomfortable to deal with, it brings the issue to the surface, helps look at it objectively and deal with it.
- Enforcement approach – sometimes you use this and impose your decision on others.
- Bargaining approach – you use this to find a solution with which both parties feel satisfied.
- Retreat approach – you should try not to use this, as it involves trying to avoid the issue. Although this approach prevents you from bringing issues to the surface, it can sometimes prove useful when the conflict is trivial.

## Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is an awareness of your own actions and feelings and understanding how it affects those around you. It may also mean that you value others and empathize with them on different levels. Goleman (2005) has proposed five elements that define emotional intelligence:

1. Self-awareness – people with high emotional intelligence are usually self-aware and take an honest look at themselves. They learn to know their strengths and weaknesses and work on them to perform better.
2. Self-regulation – this defines your ability to control your emotions. People who self-regulate maintain integrity and do not make impulsive, careless decisions.
3. Empathy – this is the ability to identify and understand the wants, needs and viewpoints of others. Empathic people are good at recognizing and understanding others' feelings. They are usually good at listening and managing relationships and relating to others.
4. Motivation – people with high emotional intelligence are well-motivated. They are highly productive and very effective in whatever they do.

5. Social skills – those with high emotional intelligence have good social skills. They are excellent communicators and able manage disputes effectively.

You need not only good technical skills but, more importantly, good emotional intelligence to aid the smooth running of an organization (Goleman, 1995).

## Conflict resolution process

Listening carefully and empathically to the viewpoints of both parties and gathering clear and concise information from both can form a sound basis for resolving the conflict. Rayeski and Bryant (1994) have recommended the team resolution process to handle conflict. Conflict should be handled on an informal basis, which may allow time for resolution or self-correction by the individuals involved. Collaborating on a one-to-one basis or with the help of a mediator can be the next step. If that fails, team counselling may be required. Brainstorming all possible solutions and being open to ideas and in the end negotiation may be useful to find a solution.

If the patients have any concerns, every trust has a well-established local resolution system in place, such as a Patient Advice and Liaison Service or Independent Complaints Advocacy Service (Hooke and Trivedi, 2008). If the local resolution team fails to solve the issue, the matter could be forwarded on to independent review and lastly to the Health Service Ombudsman.

For NHS staff members, it is worth looking at the intranet to get information on an individual trust's conflict resolution policy. It may also be useful to approach the human resources department.

## Conclusions

Conflict is often seen as negative, but it can prevent issues from festering under the surface and causing problems. Individuals have different ways of handling conflict, some more effective than others. In the NHS, it is wise to seek help within the organization if you are experiencing conflict. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine.*

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## KEY POINTS

- Conflict can be negative.
- However, conflict can bring issues to the surface and enable them to be dealt with.
- All conflict, whether big or small, should be dealt with to prevent it escalating.
- Most NHS trusts have arrangements for dealing with conflict.