

Successfully Managing Conflict in Your Veterinary Practice

Charlotte Lacroix, DVM, JD
Veterinary Business Advisors, Inc.

The reality is, you probably spend all day long with your co-workers, almost every single day of the week—and so, it isn't reasonable to expect that no conflict will ever exist at your practice. It is reasonable, though, as well as desirable, to create a healthy working environment, one where conflicts that arise are managed in a functional way, a way that allows your practice to flourish. Plus, from a practical standpoint, if you're in a supervisory position, managing conflict is simply part of your job.

To effectively manage workplace conflict, here are nine strategies to consider.

#1 Accept the reality of conflict.

Just as the avoidance of making a dentist appointment won't make your toothache go away, pretending that you don't notice simmering conflict in the office won't work well, either. In both cases, avoiding the reality of the situation is likely to make things worse, perhaps significantly so.

As a quick demonstration, compare and contrast these two scenarios to quickly see how conflict avoidance just doesn't work.

- When you face conflict head on, you can often manage the situation before it grows too large or becomes too heated.
- If you become known as the manager who won't help to address sticky situations, employees will learn that they just need to handle these situations themselves—and it's highly unlikely that they'll all want to deal with the conflicts in the exact same way, which will only lead to more conflict. This also opens the door wide open for bullies to take advantages of more subdued employees, which is a recipe for disaster, including but not limited to the likelihood of low retention rates at your practice.

So, as a foundation, it's important to accept conflict as a natural part of working together.

#2 Also accept how conflict often means that employees really care.

Frustrating as conflict in the workplace can be, especially on a hectic day at the practice, the real enemy is apathy. Many times, a conflict between two co-workers over, say, the best way to schedule appointments may be because they both truly care about your clients and want to make their experiences a good one.

Apathy? Well, whatever.

#3 Stay Calm and Help Employees to Find Common Ground

When employees have different opinions about, say, how to arrange the room where you board pets, it's unlikely that one employee has all the right ideas and, another, all the wrong ones. So, as manager, if you can stay calm when a debate starts that threatens to turn into an argument, you can guide employees into using the best parts of each person's ideas. Better yet, you can ask each of them to describe a situation where elements of everyone's ideas could combine into a satisfactory solution.

Even if all doesn't progress perfectly, if the result is improved processes and procedures and/or an improved ability of employees to collaborate and cooperate, then the conflict ultimately had a positive impact. If the conflict motivates the involved employees (or, for that matter, the bystanders) to handle a conflict in a better way going forward, that's also a plus.

#4 Offer Conflict Resolution Training

Not all situations involving conflict end well, of course, and even those with positive effects may also have negative ones, as well. Perhaps a particular conflict was resolved, but one or more employees now hold back from sharing good suggestions or relationships aren't as comfortable as they previously were. In this case, damage control might need to be done—and, the beauty of conflict resolution training is that, if well done with receptive participants, healing can take place. Plus, this training can play an important role in preventing future conflicts from getting out of control, thanks to the effective techniques taught to employees.

Let's say that your practice holds a monthly lunch-and-learn session where, one month, you learn more about the new practice software and, the next, you review the practice's sexual harassment policies. It makes good sense to also offer a session on conflict management—not to point fingers at anyone, just to have someone with expertise in this area share useful tips and strategies.

#5 Remember How Much Words Matter

Once employees stop using “you messages,” as in “Look what you did again with this paperwork” to “I messages,” such as “I feel more comfortable when we file away our paperwork after each client leaves so that we don't get confused,” disagreements are less likely to occur.

The same is true when employees stop using “always” and “never” in their work conversations. Take a look at the differences between these two statements:

- Our paperwork is piling up.
- Our paperwork is ALWAYS piling up.

#6 Don't Forget to Document Areas of Significant Conflict

Although minor instances of conflict don't need documented (unless, say, one particular employee seems to be involved with one nearly every day), it is crucial to document instances of serious conflict according to the policies and procedures laid out by your practice's employee manual. This can come in handy during employee performance reviews, as just one example; and, in worst-case scenario, for when you need to fire someone who doesn't adjust his or her behaviors through your standard disciplinary processes.

#7 Ensure that Policies and Procedures Are Clearly Defined

Although this isn't always the case, sometimes conflicts between employees about how to do something highlight the fact that clear procedures don't exist in this particular area of work. When this happens, the conflict can serve as an impetus to add clarity. Sometimes, it might just take you, as manager, sharing information with employees that they didn't previously have. Other times, a team approach works better, as involved parties decide the best ways to handle the situations that have caused the conflict, choosing among several acceptable alternatives.

#8 Complete Agreement is Not the Goal

As you work towards reduced conflict in your practice, it's important to focus on the right goal, and that goal isn't a complete lack of disagreement. Some of the best ideas come from group discussions and collaborations, and from examining different approaches offered by different employees. You can tell that your practice is handling differences of opinion in a healthy way when team members focus on the tasks at hand, not differences in personality.

- Unhealthy: I don't like the way you talk to clients when you're in a hurry.
- Healthy: We've been extra busy lately. I'd like to see us be efficient while remaining friendly, but it doesn't feel like we've figured that out yet.

It's healthy to have differences of opinions about how to accomplish goals as long as the situation is addressed in a respectful way that allows for diverse points of view.

#9 Listening is Key

When employees at your practice disagree in a healthy way, it involves careful listening of the other person's position, when people aren't anxious to jump in and speak over the other person to share their own viewpoints. This type of active listening includes actually encouraging the other person to share more about his or her opinions and ideas, and to ask questions to find out more.

It can be helpful to restate what the other person just said to make sure it's accurately understood; the goal, of course, isn't to repeat the other side of the conversation verbatim, but to restate the main ideas, including both the factual portions of the message and any emotional components of it. It can also be quite helpful when someone can thank the other person for sharing his or her viewpoints, even when (especially when!) it's different from one's own.

Consider holding workshops where employees can role play scenarios, using active listening techniques. This can help in conflict resolution, sure, but it also has much greater application.