

# When heads collide: Navigating conflict in the workplace

Bethany S. Schilling, DVM, MA

Texas Tech University School of Veterinary Medicine  
Amarillo, TX 79124

Conflict is a normal part of life and will occur in any relationship from time to time. Conflict is truly an opportunity to get to take in someone else's viewpoint, opposing preferences and understand their personal values. The ability to embrace conflict is a sign of a healthy organization, as it demonstrates a foundation of trust. Passion, growth and change will inevitably bring about conflict, which when dealt with appropriately, can result in an organization flourishing.

However, conflict in the workplace can be constant and rampant. This, when left alone or poorly managed, can result in significant cost to the organization's bottom line. This can be seen through loss of employee engagement/efficiency, decreased attention to client/patient care, and high turnover and burnout rates. Unmanaged conflict is the largest reducible cost in an organization.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, when conflict is managed well, you can see these benefits: better work outcomes, opportunities to learn and grow, improved relationships, higher job satisfaction, and a more inclusive work environment.

When conflict arises, it is important to determine what type of conflict you are dealing with to approach it in the most effective manner. The four types of workplace conflict are:

1. Task Conflict, "the WHAT" – this is when people may disagree over a goal or what they are trying to achieve.
2. Process Conflict, "The HOW" – this is when people cannot agree on how the job gets done.
3. Status Conflict, "The WHO"—this is a disagreement about who is in charge.
4. Interpersonal Conflict, "The DYNAMIC" – this is when you feel disrespected, hurt or that your relationship is at risk.<sup>2</sup>

The "Clear the AIR" model, from the late Marshall Rosenberg's work and the Compassionate Communication Model, can help provide a framework for approaching and working through conflict.

## Awareness

The first step is awareness of what happened and what type of conflict is occurring. Many times, the initial response to conflict is anger, which can serve as a reminder to pause and look deeper at what exactly is the primary issue at hand. This pause helps allow space to give one the chance to become aware of the thoughts, feelings and reactions they are experiencing in their body. Using descriptive, specific language, rather than vague, judgmental language can help facilitate engagement with the person of conflict. Special attention needs to be paid to the non-verbal communication including kinesics, paralanguage, autonomic changes and proxemics.

## Identification

The second step is identification of your own thoughts, feelings, and needs that have been triggered. Each person has needs whether they be physical, mental, or emotional. While all needs are universal, the way in which those needs are met is unique to each individual. The use of "I" statements to talk about your own experience can reduce the risk that the other person will react negatively and increase the likelihood that the person will continue to stay open to what is being discussed.

## Response

Once you have identified your own internal state and acknowledged the other person's needs, a conversation can be initiated. The use of core communication skills including non-verbal awareness, open-ended questions, reflective listening and empathy, can help create a connection with the other person. Two additional skills that are particularly helpful in creating connection during moments of conflict are affirming statements and conciliatory gestures. Affirming statements acknowledge the strengths of the other. Conciliatory gestures involve taking accountability for your side of the conflict and allow you to validate the other person's experience, reducing the likelihood the person will stay on the defensive. It is at this point you can make a specific request of the other person.

Managing conflict in the workplace can be a challenge, but with application of the skills within the AIR Model, navigating these conversations can hopefully result in better outcomes for all.

## Resources

1. Dana D. *Managing Differences. How to Build Better Relationships at Work and Home.* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. MT Publications; 2006.
2. Gallo A. 4 types of conflict and how to manage them. *Harv Bus Rev.* 2023, July 27. <https://hbr.org/podcast/2015/11/4-types-of-conflict-and-how-to-manage-them>

