Interpersonal Staff and Patient Conflict Management in the Dental Office

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Defining Conflict

**Definition:** Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.

**Expressed Struggle:**

Communication is central to conflict
- Communication behavior often creates conflict.
- Communication behavior reflects conflict.
- Communication is the vehicle for the productive or destructive management of conflict.

**Interdependence:**

The parties to a conflict cannot achieve their goals alone. If they could, they would do so.

The Parties to a conflict are never totally antagonistic and share some mutual interests, even if the interest is to keep the conflict going.

**Perceived Incompatible Goals:**

People usually engage in conflict over some goal or issue.

Most conflicts do not revolve around mere personality differences (personality conflicts).

**Perceived Scarce Resources:**

There aren't enough resources to achieve all goals or settle all issues.

Resources can be intangible things, such as respect.

**Interference or the Perception of Interference:**

We perceive that the other person, either in the pursuit of their goals, or through willful manipulation, is interfering with our ability to achieve our goals.

Notice that there is no mention of personality conflicts.

**Notes:**
Avoid Face-Saving Issues

“Face” is the image of themselves that a person wants to maintain in interaction. Face is a communicator’s claim to be seen as a certain kind of person. During conflict, a person’s face or claim to be a certain kind of person can be threatened or attacked.

In conflict, individuals are motivated to maintain and save their own face, or may attack or support another person’s face.

Maintain Face: Making comments that support one’s own image claims.

Face Saving: Defensive attempts to restore our preferred image of ourselves as a response to an attack on that image from another.

Face Attacking: Statements that deny the person’s image claims about themselves.

Face Supporting: Statements that bolster the image claims of another person.

Rule: Resolving conflict is easier if parties do not feel the need to engage in face-saving behaviors.

Face attacks are humiliating and almost always put person in a defensive posture of reestablishing their self-image.

Face saving behavior usually limits a person’s flexibility and likelihood of change. People refuse to compromise because these will make them look weak.

Face saving behavior is done at the expense of focusing on the issues.

Valuable energy and enthusiasm are siphoned off from the conflict.

Notes:
What should you do?

Implement the Following Suggestions to Avoid the Need for Face-Saving Behavior

Maintain Face

Allow conflict parties to bolster their self-image with positive stories or narratives. Support these narratives with affirming comments.

Give parties a “way out” of the conflict by signaling that concessions on their part will be met with concessions on the part of the other person.

Attacking Face (ways to avoid)

Refrain from face attacks.

Use active listening to reframe techniques to restate the face-attack so only the major concern remains, not the attack on the person’s self image.

- Restating: Simply repeat something one of the participants said: shows you are listening, makes the person feel acknowledged and confirmed.

- Summarizing: A form of restatement that includes several points.

- Ask Question: Allows you to acquire information you need (covered in detail later)

- Reframing: Restating the person’s concern without the emotional or face attack component.

Allow the person to describe the problem and then go to asking them what they would like to see happen.

Face Support

Congratulate parties on areas of agreement and progress, even if these are small.

Acknowledge the validity or legitimacy of another person’s position.
Create a Supportive Climate

This section suggests for creating a supportive office including the doctors, hygienists, and office staff. Climate is the prevailing temper, attitude, and outlook of the group or organization.

**Defensive Climate**: Defensive climates develop when people perceive a threat or anticipate a threat from another person. Rather than devoting themselves to the task at hand, the defensive person must also think about how they appear to others (their face), and how they may be viewed most favorably.

- Defensive people tend to distort what they perceive and act in a paranoid fashion.
- Defensiveness lessens the chances of productive conflict management.

**Supportive Climate**: People feel comfortable expressing themselves because they are not focused on supporting their face.

- Possible to develop clear perceptions of everyone’s motives.
- Accurate communication is more likely.
- Trust is easier to develop.
- Easier to come to shared assessments of the problem.

**Rule**: Resolving conflict is easier in a supportive rather than a defensive climate.

**Evaluative Speech vs. Descriptive Speech**

Evaluative speech is global and abstract / Descriptive speech is specific and explanatory

**Control Orientation vs. Problem Orientation**

Control oriented seeks to assign blame and impose solutions / Problem oriented speech focuses on the future and coming-up with solutions.

**Neutrality vs. Empathy**

Neutrality refuses to acknowledge feelings or emotions / Empathy listens and acknowledges emotional components
What should you do?

Implement the Following Suggestions to Create a Supportive Communication Climate

**Description vs. Evaluation**

Encourage “I” messages to avoid exaggeration, and suggests you “own” the message.
- Use the personal pronoun “I”.
- Describe the problem.
- State the feelings or emotions the problem creates

Describe the problem by referring to specific behaviors rather than global attitudes.
- “You have been late three times in the past week.”
- “We’ve had several patient complaints in the past week, and these folks aren’t known for complaining.”
- “You’re always late and this indicates a lousy attitude toward your work.”

Avoid syntactical expressions that are sarcastic or hostile
- Hostile joking and sarcasm are insidious ways to criticize and should be avoided
- Hostile questions find fault rather than request information and should be avoided.

**Control Oriented vs. Problem Oriented**

Avoid statements that seek to assign blame for the problem.

Avoid assuming that failures are all personal (staff failures may result from: personal issues, or structural issues such as being overwhelmed, undertrained, unsupported, or any number of other sources.

Define the behavioral problems, and then focus on how to solve, rather than affixing blame.

**Empathy vs. Neutrality**

Empathy is improved through various active listening processes (see above).

**Notes:**
**Putnam & Wilson Conflict Styles Scale**

Directions: Think of a conflict-type you have encountered in task situations with your parents, students, peers, or superiors. Then, indicate below how frequently you engage in each of the described behaviors. Respond to the items with a particular conflict in mind. For each item, select the number that represents the behavior you are most likely to exhibit. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond to all items on the scale. The alternatives are:

1. Never
2. Sometimes
3. Very seldom
4. Occasionally
5. Often
6. Very often
7. Always

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<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>I blend my new ideas with others to create new solutions to conflict.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>I shy away from topics that are sources of dispute.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>I insist my position be accepted during a conflict.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I try to find solutions that combine a variety of viewpoints.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>I steer clear of disagreeable situations.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>I give in a little on my ideas when others also give in.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>I look for middle-of-the-road solutions.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>I avoid a person I suspect of wanting to discuss a disagreement.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>I minimize the significance of conflict.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>I build an integrated solution from the issues.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>I stress my point by hitting my fist on the table.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>I will go 50-50 to reach a settlement.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>I raise my voice when trying to get others to accept my position.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>I look for creative solutions to conflicts.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>I keep quiet about my views in order to avoid disagreements.</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>I’m willing to give in a little if the other person will meet me half-way.</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>I downplay the importance of a disagreement.</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>I reduce disagreements by making them seem insignificant.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>I will meet the opposition midway to reach a settlement.</td>
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20. I assert my opinion forcefully.  
21. I dominate arguments until others accept my position.  
22. I encourage working together to create solutions to disagreements.  
23. I try to use everyone's ideas to generate solutions to problems.  
24. I make trade-offs to reach solutions.  
25. I argue insistently for my stance.  
26. I withdraw when someone confronts me about a controversial issue.  
27. I sidestep disagreements when they arise.  
28. I try to smooth over disagreements when they arise.  
29. I insist my position be accepted during a conflict.  
30. I take a tough stand, refusing to retreat.  
31. I settle differences by meeting the other person halfway.  
32. I am steadfast in my views.  
33. I make our differences seem less serious.  
34. I hold my tongue rather than argue.  
35. I ease conflict by claiming our differences are trivial.  

**Scoring**

This instrument measures three types of styles: *Avoidance, Problem-Solving, and Competition*, and this is how you determine your scores on each dimension.

1) Add your scores for questionnaire items numbered: 2, 5, 8, 15, 17, 18, 26, 27, 28, 33, 34, 35. Divide that total by 12 and you have your average score on the item/dimension of *avoidance*. A high numerical score (out of 7) means you use this style often.

2) Add your scores for items numbered: 1, 4, 6, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, 22, 23, 24. Divide that score by 11. This results in your average score on *collaboration*. A high score (out of 7) means you use this style often.

3) Add your scores for items numbered: 3, 7, 9, 11, 13, 20, 21, 25, 29, 30, 31, 32. Divide the total by 12, and the answer is your average on *competition*. A high score (out of 7) means you use this style often.
Conflict Styles Matrix

Concern for Issue

High

Competition

Collaboration

Avoidance

Accommodation

Concern for Other Person

Low

High

Compromise

Notes:
Conflict Styles

What happens when different styles collide?

Competitive Style meets competitive style

Competitive Style meets collaborative style

What should you do?

Studies show that when groups use collaborative modes of conflict management it improves task accomplishment over accommodation or competing styles.

Research also shows that managers arrive at poor solutions when they adopt competitive styles and better solutions when they adopt collaborative approaches to conflict.

Collaborative styles work best when parties must work together in the future, when both parties are open minded, willing to ignore power difference, and both recognize the conflict early and deal with it before it escalates.

Competitive styles work best when one best solution exists or when a person is involved in a value conflict.

Any tactic that recognizes and openly deals with conflict increases the quality of the solution. Thus, collaborating, competing, and compromising are superior to accommodation and avoiding the conflict.

*Start out with the Collaborative style and use compromising and competing as back-ups, in case collaboration does not work.*

Notes:
Developing Collaborative Solutions to Conflict

To develop problem-solving solutions that minimize the need for compromise for both sides, it is vital to understand the difference between positions and interests.

**Positions**: An initial demand or set of demands a person makes when he/she enters negotiation. *It's what the person wants!*

I’m renting office space and I want $7.50 a square foot, that is my position.

**Interests**: These are the reasons behind the position or reasons that lead you to stake out a particular position. *It's why you want it!*

Although the market price per square foot is only $7.00, I need the extra money for renovations, and believe the high quality of what I are offering justifies the extra expense.

Much conflict management focuses exclusively on positional bargaining (compromising and trade-offs). In the office example, if you are a potential renter, and I say $7.50 a square foot and you know the market value is $7.00, how will this negotiation proceed?

What kind of conflict management style does this represent? _____________________________

There is nothing inherently wrong with this style of conflict management. It is a time honored way of achieving result quickly and efficiently. However, it prevents the possibility of unique and creative problem-solving solutions. Before jumping to this form of compromising, at least try to find more creative solutions.
What should you do?

**Interest Oriented Brainstorming for Collaboration**

Step 1: List the positions and interests that you are bringing to the negotiation: both yours and theirs.

- Ask Why? Questions to understand interests behind positions.
- Ask Why not? Questions to understand interests behind positions.

Step 2: Brainstorm options or solutions to the problem.

Step 3: Eliminate the solutions that clearly don’t meet one or other party’s basic needs.

Step 4: Present your solution to party and develop it into viable proposal.

**Failing a Collaborative Solution, Compromise**

**Notes:**
Finding Ways to Compromise

To understand compromise, we need to understand two different kinds of agreement.

Consensual Agreement: Shared interpretation of an event, activity, proposal, or person. Similar to the term “mutual understanding” from the WSJ article.

The bank attempted to communicate its interpretation of customers and selling through a series of video tape vignettes. These portrayals implied that customers were fraught with financial problems and naïve about bank services created to solve these problems. In one vignette, for example, a family was talking in their living room about a recent overdraft charge at the bank. The family consisted of father, mother, a son in his mid-20s, and his fiancée. The father was quite upset about the overdraft charge:

Father: I was at the bank this afternoon to check out that overdraft charge we got—we have never had an overdraft charge. But after I complained to the teller, he told me about his overdraft protection plan that they have. Now he really solved a problem for me.

Fiancée: That’s the kind of service we’ve been looking for all day.

Mother: Well, if you ask me, that young man at the bank did you a big favor. That’s what real service is!

Father: You bet it is. I honestly didn’t know they offered that service.

Mother: It makes me wonder how many other services we don’t know about.

This story frames the customer as convenience seeking, but naïve about bank services. The tape implies that lack of information prevents customers from consciously shopping for bank services, but that customers would become conscious shoppers if they had the proper information.

On the basis of the frame of customer naiveté, the tape then frames sales as purely informative talk that makes customers aware of bank services. In the middle of the above vignette, the narrator broke in to emphasize that selling is equivalent to providing information.

Narrator: [speaking to her trainees on the video tape] You aren’t here just to handle transactions. You sell services crucial to our bank. You are the leading edge of our sales team.

Trainee: I was just trying to help Mr. Jones. I didn’t know I was the leading edge of a sales team.

Narrator: [Sales] is a perfectly natural thing to do if you want to help somebody. . . . First though, we are all in agreement that making a sale is helping a customer.

In this dialogue, the narrator emphasized that making a sale is equivalent to “helping a customer” and was, therefore, “a perfectly natural thing to do.” This was an attempt to reduce
teller anxiety about the intrusiveness of selling by framing customers as naïve and sales as informative rather than persuasive talk.

If the organization was to reduce the conflict about the intrusiveness of selling, the tellers had to adopt the company’s beliefs that customers are naïve and that selling is informative talk rather than intrusive pushing.

**Contractual Agreement**: An implicit or explicit exchange between people. It occurs when one person’s ability to perform a pleasurable act depends on someone else’s willingness to concede something. Furthermore, the first person’s concession has the function of eliciting the other person’s concession.

```
Person A       Person B
Write a Book   Print a Book
A_1           B_1

A_2           B_2
Royalties     Profit
```

1 = Concession  
2 = Pleasurable act  
→ = “is followed by”

At the bank:

```
Tellers       Bank
Sell Services Pay Salaries
A_1           B_1

A_2           B_2
$10.00 an hour Increased Sales
```

To continue receiving their salary, tellers complied as best they could, with the sales quotas.
What should you do?

Compromising means you are giving up further attempt to find the perfect solution.

- Accept the fact that there is no perfect solution that meets both parties’ needs.
- Cease further persuasion designed to convince the other person that you are right.
- Don’t try and persuade the other person to see your point of view.

Trading Concessions

The following guidelines will help you trade concessions to reach an agreement

- Open optimistically: with the highest (or lowest) offer that you think is reasonable.

- Suggest a reasonable response from the other person. “If I do X, would you be willing to do Y?”

- Don’t give in a large amount on a single concessions (this raises the expectations of the other person). Give only a little bit at a time.

- Trade concessions until a compromised is reached.
**Positions and Interests**

Use this worksheet to identify all the positions and interests for each party. Use this information to help you prepare for an upcoming conflict.

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