

The Hidden Costs of Conflict Avoidance

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Conflict avoidance can result in unintended consequences for the whole organization.

Introduction

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Romans 12:18

For most of us, peace is the norm. We live in a country free of civil wars, and our relative separation from the rest of the world by two oceans insulates our sense of safety. Of course the attacks of 9/11 changed that in certain ways, but our long history of freedom and independence has served us well in restoring the country to a new normal, a cautious and informed kind of peace.

Our preference for peace has deep roots. There are several biblical references such as Romans 12:18, calling for people to be at peace with each other, and our natural instincts seem to affirm our preferences by urging us to avoid conflicts. Other biblical wisdom points to the value of prompt forgiveness when conflicts do emerge, seemingly affirming the perception that conflict is to be avoided in the first place.

But there are costs to consider when carrying this philosophy over to organizations of all types, including medical groups. Physicians are trained to think independently, which helps them make sound medical judgments, but sometimes compromises relationships with peers. Avoiding conflicts can sometimes result in greater problems and complications in relationships, processes, and outcomes. When those consequences compromise the purposes of the organization, it is easy to see how conflict avoidance carries a high cost.

Unhealthy Consequences of Conflict Avoidance

As an independent consultant to medical practices, I often encounter corporate cultures that show evidence of a history of avoiding conflict. Two main themes emerge:

- **Bad behavior appears good.**

When disruptive behavior is not confronted, the disruptive person usually doesn't recognize the consequences of their behavior on others, and may actually feel affirmed by getting away with it.

- **Disruption snowballs.**

Negative individual behavior that is not placed in check can have unintended consequences for the whole organization. The disruption can snowball into staff turnover, lackluster billing and collections efforts, poor patient service, and even medical misadventures.

Conflicts are a natural consequence of human relationships.

Organizations need to learn how to “fight fair”.

Healthy Conflict

Another approach to dealing with organizational conflict begins by recognizing that it is inevitable. Conflicts are a natural consequence of human relationships. They are likely to be commonplace even in the most loving relationships because of the complexity of our mind, the limits of our communication, and the brokenness of our human condition. Rather than avoid conflicts, I believe we are wise to recognize that:

Conflict is a prerequisite – and a by-product – of change.

When conflict occurs, it is a signal to us that something is ready to change, and our job is to find out what it is and how it must occur. Avoiding conflict merely prolongs the disruption, allowing it to grow and to extend its unintended consequences throughout the organization. Personal depression can be an unintended consequence of not facing an internal conflict or condition in a healthy way.

Conflict can also be a by-product of change; so if you recognize something needs to change, you can expect conflict to emerge when the change occurs rather than be surprised by it. In fact, when something needs to change in an organization, sometimes managers have to *inflict* conflict – introduce it at the appropriate place and time to create the needed change. A staff layoff can be an example of inflicted conflict. It creates disruption to the workers, but may be necessary to save the company during an economic downturn.

Another way to view healthy conflict is to recognize that organizations need to learn how to “fight fair.” Mean-spirited confrontation can obviously compound conflicts, but tactful intervention can strengthen relationships and advance the purposes of organizations beyond their expectations. Honest discussion takes preparation and courage, but it is worth the effort, both for personal growth and for organizational growth.

Healthy Corporate Culture

Here are a few suggestions for creating an environment that sustains healthy relationships, and encourages appropriate confrontation when it is necessary.

- Structure an expectation for mutual accountability. Foster transparency in relationships that allow – and encourage – a free and open exchange of ideas about medicine, about business, and about life. Meaningful personal growth can only take place through disclosure of oneself and through feedback from others. Build organizations that are psychologically safe for those exchanges to take place.
- Create a forum for relationship discussions. Conflicts can be easily overlooked in the course of a busy day, but when relationship patterns emerge that represent threats to the organization’s health, the group needs to have a time and place to air their differences and work them out. It might be at an annual retreat, a monthly board meeting, a scheduled lunch meeting for more personal but wide-ranging conversation, or at a specific encounter designed for the purpose of compassionate feedback. Some groups engage in various forms of peer review from structured annual consultations with a medical director to confidential surveys. Whatever the method, it should be understood as a means of preventing conflicts before they get out of hand, and resolving them in a timely manner.

A professional mediator can do a great deal to avoid serious legal confrontations.

Ephesians 4:15 “speak the truth in love.”

- Submit to mediation before tensions reach the breaking point. A professional mediator can do a great deal to avoid serious legal confrontations. If tensions threaten the very fabric of the organization, the group would be wise to seek an independent psychologist, an organizational development consultant, or a labor arbitrator to look for common ground and work toward a sustainable resolution. Sometimes when legal resources are engaged, permanent damage is sustained to relationships that might have otherwise had a chance to repair.
- Discern the difference between personal and corporate interventions. When one person is disrupting the organization, some managers are inclined to confront the whole organization by issuing a new policy about that kind of behavior. The typical result, however, is that the policy upsets everyone *except the one it was intended for*. Using policies to confront individuals usually backfires. It represents a lack of courageous leadership.
- On the other hand, if everyone is misbehaving in a certain manner, other managers might take the approach of punishing one person out of the group, “to hold them as an example.” This is equally unfair and spineless. Interventions must match the behavioral challenge. Reserve policies for group-wide changes and personal counseling for individual conflicts.

Conclusion

Peace isn't the only message for relationships found in the Bible. Ephesians 4:15 encourages us to “speak the truth in love,” which sounds like tactful honesty at the highest level. Healthy organizations are those that embrace both premises for relationships.