How to manage conflict at work

Conflict at work can be upsetting for all staff involved. In this article Carolyne Crowe from VDS Training takes us through the steps to manage conflict in your clinic.

Learning to manage conflict effectively is an essential skill for everyone in practice. Whether you are a team member, a manager or leader of the business, you know that a motivated and harmonious team will be the most productive. However, with so many differing personalities, values, desires and needs, some degree of conflict seems inevitable. Properly addressed, these differences can be the strengths within the team and healthy debate and challenge of ideas will foster both learning and trust. In this article, we will help you to understand your natural response to conflict; whether you run for the hills or automatically get on the offensive. We will take you through the steps to consider when these challenging situations arise within the practice team and offer suggestions on how you can build your confidence and find the appropriate response each time.

What is conflict?
Conflict may be defined as ’a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals’.

Everyone is different... and this is a good thing! Differences within a team are often beneficial and should be celebrated; they enable the whole team to be stronger and more flexible as everyone brings their own skills, strengths and ideas. However, with everyone bringing different goals, values, beliefs and needs, along with our natural tendency to focus on the negatives of these differences, it’s easy to see how differences inevitably lead to conflict, even if the level of conflict is low.

Since conflict within a team is common (on average there will be five issues a day), it’s essential to be self-aware, to understand what causes conflict, how you manage it and what strategies you employ to resolve it.
What causes conflict?

There are many potential causes of conflict. These include:

- Personality clashes
- Differences in needs and expectations
- Differing values
- Unresolved problems in the past
- Increased workload
- Change in practice.

Conflict often results from people misunderstanding the behaviour of others or from poor communication rather than from genuine intent. If we don’t understand other people’s motives or reasons, it is easy to be irritated or upset by their behaviour when this was far from their aim.

Why do we need to manage conflict?

Research shows that unresolved conflict can lead to aggression; either obvious outward aggression or passive aggressive behaviours – both having a damaging effect on individual and team performance.

Conflict can be both destructive and productive, but, if left to escalate, the outcomes will always be non-productivity, team breakdown, disconnection and disengagement. However, conflict that is managed and beneficially resolved can be engaging, motivating and lead to better end results. In order for teams to be high performing, it is essential stress is minimized and inter-personal communication is enhanced and developed, hence the importance of dealing with conflict appropriately and effectively.

Conflict management asserts that while all conflicts cannot necessarily be resolved, learning how to manage them can decrease the odds of non-productive escalation. It requires skills in conflict resolution, self-awareness, understanding why conflict has occurred in the first place and establishing a practice structure for management.

What are the signs of conflict in practice?

Some signs of conflict are obvious, such as heated exchanges between colleagues; others may be subtler, as people withdraw and hide their feelings.

The sooner the problem is recognized, the better – dealt with early, there will be minimal negative impact. However, if conflict is left unresolved, a number of effects will be seen in time – some can be quantified, some require insight and sensitivity to spot early.
How do people respond to conflict?

Mentally we respond to conflict in one of two ways, fight or flight. Either we want to get away or we are ready to take on anyone who comes our way. Think for a moment about when you are in conflict – do you want to leave, or do you want to fight? Neither response is good or bad; it is simply a learned behaviour, picked up from our parents and our peers as we grow up. However, we can all learn and develop our conflict management techniques and gain the ability to override this natural instinct and choose our response to conflict, turning a reactive situation into a more proactive and controlled response. The first step is to understand how you currently deal with conflict.

There are a number of ways in which we can do this:

1. Managing the differences between team members to decrease conflict

   DISC behavioural profiling is an online behavioural profiling tool that recognizes everyone is different, but that we are predictably different. It enables you to understand why people behave in the way they do and identify what their motivators and drivers are as well as what their fears are. These are all key to understanding why conflict has happened and informing how to work together to resolve the issue.

   Using DISC enables an open, non-emotional conversation through an understanding of the different styles in conflict and recognition of each other’s strengths. There are four different DISC styles outlined in Figure 1.

   Fundamentally people are different – vets, nurses, support staff; each of them thinks, feels and behaves differently. Having an understanding of your colleagues’ DISC styles as well as your own will give you the tools to be a better and more effective team member. You can modify your language and behaviour accordingly, enabling you to communicate more effectively, proactively manage conflict and take the stress out of working with others.

2. Developing an assertive response

   In times of conflict, we often need to be more or less assertive in our behaviour. Assertiveness is a balance, it requires expressing your wants, needs, desires and opinions while respecting those of others. Being assertive isn’t about winning and it’s not about conceding, it’s about choosing an appropriate response that is driven by your head and not your emotions.

3. Managing your emotions

   Conflict occurs when we aren’t in control of our emotions and behaviour.

   By learning to control your thoughts you can influence your feelings and markedly change both your level of control and your ability to create a win-win outcome in the face of conflict.

   ![Figure 1: In DISC behavioural profiling there are four different DISC styles.](image-url)
We experience a stimulus and, depending on its meaning to us, emotions are evoked. If we react immediately, we aren’t in control of our behaviour. In terms of conflict, you can’t control what someone else is going to do (the stimulus) but you can control how you feel about it, as well as what your behaviour is in response.

Being assertive isn’t about winning and it’s not about conceding, it’s about choosing an appropriate response that is driven by your head and not your emotions.

To take control of your emotions, and therefore your behaviour, you need to give yourself time. Become proactive not reactive in your behaviour. Press pause when you are exposed to a stimulus and experience an emotion:

Think ➞ Feel ➞ Do

4. Managing the environment
Is your environment conducive to proactively managing conflict or are you trying to have an important conversation in a busy corridor or between consults? Setting the correct environment is key to a successful outcome, so consider:

- **Time** – Do you have enough time to work through the issue?
- **Low pressure** – Has the heat been taken out of the situation? Both parties need to be in a proactive mindset; you may not be able to control someone else’s mindset but you can ensure that you are both approaching the meeting in a positive state
- **Mutual ground** – Ensure that you are in an environment that works for all parties
- **Manage interruptions** – Choose a time and place where you aren’t going to be interrupted
- **Minimize stress** – If you are stressed, there is a greater chance of misunderstanding, and thus of potential conflict. Good conflict management can only occur when stress levels are minimized and individuals have coping strategies for the pressures of working in a veterinary practice.

5. Choosing how to respond to conflict
Whether we feel like we want to run away or stand up and fight, we can proactively choose how to respond to conflict, in one of five ways (Figure 2). Which approach do you currently choose? Is this appropriate? Could you choose a different response?

**Competing** occurs when there is high assertiveness and low cooperation. It is appropriate when rapid action needs to be taken, when unpopular decisions need to be made, or when protecting your own interests (when you need to stand up for your rights, resist aggression and pressure).

Potential disadvantages of a competing style are:

- Negatively impacting on the long-term relationship between parties
- Causing the opponent to react in the same way, even if this was not their initial intention
- Inability to take advantage of the strengths in the other side’s position
- Requires huge amounts of energy, can be exhausting to some individuals.

**Collaborating (win-win)** occurs when there is high assertiveness and high cooperation. It is most appropriate when the conflict is important to the people involved, when the issues are too important to compromise, when merging perspectives, when gaining commitment or trust and in developing relationships.

Also described as ‘putting an idea on top of an idea…. in order to achieve the best solution to the conflict’, a collaborative solution is a creative one that wouldn’t have been generated by a single individual.

Collaboration is always the best mode of conflict resolution but it does take time and energy, which we don’t always have in practice.
Compromising looks for an expedient and mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. This technique is used when quick or temporary settlement is needed on important or complex issues, or when the goals are moderately important but not worth spending lots of time and energy on. This can be a good practical solution when time is of the essence; however, one disadvantage is the potential to create a dissatisfactory situation for all concerned (lose-lose).

Avoiding occurs where there is low assertiveness and low cooperation. This course of action may result from a fear of engaging in conflict or a lack of confidence in conflict management skills. Times when the avoiding mode is appropriate are when you have issues of low importance (not worth the effort), to reduce tensions, when it is not the right time or place to confront the issue, when you need time to consider your next step, or when you are in a position of lower power. The main disadvantage to avoidance is that the underlying conflict is still there – nothing has been done to reduce the problem and by not addressing the issue respect is soon lost from team members, undermining the ability to lead and manage others effectively.

Honesty and clear communication play an important role in resolution. Acquaint yourself with what’s happening and be open about the problem.

Accommodating takes place where there is low assertiveness and high cooperation, putting the concerns of others first. It is appropriate when showing reason, developing performance, creating good will, or keeping the peace. It can be a good strategy when the importance of the outcome is low, when you acknowledge you are wrong or when continued competition would be detrimental. The challenge with accommodating is not to be seen as a push over, the person who always gives in–then your position can become abused or you become the martyr.

Practical steps to addressing conflict

- Acknowledge that a difficult situation exists. Honesty and clear communication play an important role in resolution. Acquaint yourself with what’s happening and be open about the problem.
- Manage the environment. Is your environment conducive to proactively managing the conflict? Ask yourself “is this the right time and the right place?”
- Manage your emotions and those of others. Manage your own emotions prior to addressing the issue and during any meetings and let any individuals express their feelings. Feelings of anger and/or hurt usually accompany conflict situations so before any problem solving can take place, these emotions should be acknowledged.
- Define the problem. What are the consequences? Are differing personality styles part of the problem? Are individuals coping with the pressures they are under or are they showing signs of stress? Meet with employees separately at first and question them about the situation. Focus on the facts. Consider different behavioural styles and other factors such as levels of stress.
- Determine underlying need. The goal of conflict resolution is not to decide which person is right or wrong, the goal is to reach a solution that everyone can work with. Looking first for needs, rather than solutions, is a powerful tool for generating win-win options. Ask individuals what they need to be addressed, what are the benefits of the solutions they are proposing? This will help you to establish where each person is coming from and to identify common needs and potential solutions.
- Establish common ground, no matter how small. Establish a mutual understanding of the basic facts to ensure both parties understand how the conflict has arisen and what beliefs and assumptions may be at play:
  - Agree on the problem
  - Agree on the procedure to follow
  - Agree on worst fears
  - Agree on some small change to give an experience of success
- Focus on moving forwards. Acknowledge what has happened but don’t dwell on it. Focus on the next steps to a resolution and agree actions and owners.
- Find solutions to satisfy needs:
  - Problem-solve by generating multiple alternatives. Ask ‘what could you do?’
  - Determine which actions will be taken
  - Make sure involved parties buy into actions. Total silence may be a sign of passive resistance so be sure you get real agreement from everyone. Ask what could stop them moving forward?
- Determine follow-ups to monitor actions. You may want to schedule a follow-up meeting in 2 weeks to determine how everyone is doing. At this point, ask what’s worked well and where improvements could be made, remember this is a dynamic process.
- Determine what you’ll do if the conflict goes unresolved. If the conflict is causing a
disruption in the practice and it remains unresolved, you may need to explore other avenues. An outside facilitator may be able to offer other insights on solving the problem. In some cases, the conflict becomes a performance issue, and may become a topic for coaching sessions, performance appraisals, or disciplinary action.

Everyone thinks, feels and behaves differently; this is the strength of the team but also the challenge. Understanding your teams’ DISC styles as well as your own, enables you to modify your language and behaviours to meet the needs of the individual, enabling you to communicate more effectively, proactively manage conflict and take the stress out of working with others.

Signs of conflict in practice

- **Motivation falls** – fewer people volunteer or get involved in practice meetings, people just do what they need to do and no more
- **Behaviour changes** – derogatory remarks and comments behind people’s backs are made, social interaction with colleagues lessens
- **Productivity falls** – resulting in more queries and complaints as people aren’t communicating and working together
- **Sickness absence increases** – unhappiness at work leads to stress
- **Poor feedback** – responses to staff surveys and meetings indicate underlying dissatisfaction.

Danièle Gunn-Moore and Conor O’Halloran have published multiple papers on mycobacteriosis in both cats and dogs, including recently important work on *M. bovis* infection in cats from all over the UK that had been fed a commercial raw diet. Danièle and Conor are looking forward to receiving your mycobacterial infection questions which will be featured in the next Ask the Expert article scheduled for the New Year. Send your questions now to companion@bsava.com by Monday 14 October and the name of each person submitting a question will be entered into a prize draw with a chance to win a copy of the new BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Gastroenterology, 3rd edition.