

Conflict in the Dental Office: An Interview with Mary O'Neill



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The goal of this section is to provide insights into the thoughts and perspectives of premier educators, including executive coaches. In this issue, AACD Conference Advisory Co-Chair Dr. Hugh Flax (HF) interviews personal and executive coach Mary O'Neill (MO). Ms. O'Neill is scheduled to present at the AACD's 24th Annual Scientific Session in New Orleans on May 8th. For more information regarding AACD's conference, log onto www.aacd.com.

HF: *How is conflict created in the dental office?*

MO: Given the stress and pressure of the work day, the complexity of the tasks, the fast pace, and the close proximity in which people work with one another, conflict is a given. When you add different ages, backgrounds, responsibilities, perceptions and experiences—along with varying degrees of emotional intelligence—you have a recipe for conflict! This is true for any work group...or family. In fact, I don't think that the "dental family" is that different from a lot of other families. Conflict makes them weary; most don't like it, and very few know how to deal with it effectively.

In my work with dental practices, it is common to hear doctors say "I wish they'd just get over it" or "I just don't want to deal with it" or "I wish I could just do dentistry!" Whenever I share this feedback with my audiences we always have a good laugh because everyone can relate to these feelings. Yet, at the same time, we all know that most people don't "just get over it."

The truth is you have to have a system in place for resolving conflict. You have to train people to use the system, and (if you're not a "people person" or if communication is not your strength) you may have to delegate the task so there is a "point

person" for your group. In any case, conflict resolution is a leadership imperative.

Below are some typical examples of dental office conflicts I have dealt with in recent months. Many of these issues are clinical, some are administrative, and many are behavioral. All of these issues, if left unchecked, can spoil relationships and impede productivity.

- bad attitudes that bring others down
- regular use of angry tone of voice or hostile body language
- negative judgments of other team members
- personality clashes
- jumping to conclusions, catastrophizing, whining, complaining
- chronic lateness
- poor impulse control
- inflexibility
- favoritism
- illegible laboratory scripts
- blaming others (including lab staff) for mistakes
- improperly done handoffs
- improperly or inadequately updated treatment plans
- resistance to new software programs
- unequal distribution of workload
- inconsistent use of numbers with probing
- lack of thoroughness with treatment exams
- lack of leadership
- lack of team work
- lack of feedback, reviews

- lack of communication, trust, respect
- lack of follow through
- lack of training.

Does this sound familiar?

The list goes on and on—the point is that conflict is inevitable and it is not going away.

But that might actually be good news, because conflict is normal and healthy. Frankly, I'd be worried if a doctor told me that there was no conflict at all among his or her team members because—in my opinion—no conflict can equate to no growth. One of my favorite quotes by Kenneth Kay, author of *Workplace Wars and How to End Them*, is: "Conflict is only the discovery that things aren't working as well as they could be...resolving conflict is continual improvement of the team process and work flow."

So the first thing I say to clients who tell me there is conflict is "Good!" because I then know that their practice is alive and "flowing." The next question is "How are you going to work with it?" because conflict is not the problem. The real issue is how wisely, skillfully, and quickly people to choose to deal with it. Knowing how to effectively communicate about conflict is key.

Unfortunately, most of us don't feel as comfortable with our communication skills as we might like. Therefore, we often choose to avoid difficult situations rather than confront them. And we all

know what happens when we do that.

HF: *What are the advantages when a dental team begins to confront and resolve problems?*

MO: The greatest advantage of confronting an issue (provided it is done thoughtfully, carefully, and skillfully) is that the lines of communication re-open. That in itself is a huge relief for most people, even if it means that they have to step out of their comfort zone to do it.

There is nothing worse than having two people who have to work side by side angry at each other. The tension is palpable. Not only do other team members pick up on it, but the patients do, too—especially if they're sitting in the waiting room or lying in the chair and overhear curt or snide remarks, or angry voices. This certainly does not create a great new patient experience. In addition, this kind of behavior often offends even the most loyal, long-term patients who may feel protective of certain team members.

Finding the courage to speak up and broach the subject is the best first step anyone can take...and it is not easy. Many people tell me they haven't a clue what to say to someone they're upset with; this likely is because most of us were not raised in families where effective communication was modeled. So, even as adults working in a professional environment, we still don't

know what to do to work things out peaceably. However, if we don't do something about conflict, relationships are ruined, production is thrown off, and goals go unmet.

So, there are tangible incentives for moving beyond our disagreements. We not only restore harmony, but the practice production and profitability improves as well, along with our spirits.

HF: *What are some of the tools that you use to manage conflict and resolve problems?*

MO: My clients typically want the exact verbiage to use when addressing conflict. They will often write down, word-for-word, what I suggest they say. I encourage the use of note cards and even "scripts" if necessary, and recommend rehearsing several times before talking to someone. During my presentations, I will often use role-playing to help clients practice their communication skills.

We practice confronting (or clarifying) the situation by starting the conversation with something like, *"You may not be aware of this, but I'm sensing that something might be bothering you,"* or *"There is something on my mind that I'd like to share with you. Are you willing to talk with me about this?"* (Incidentally, by asking if someone is "willing," you are getting their permission; and, if they say yes, they are much more likely to engage and hear you out.) Then we

practice by following with some kind of positive intention such as, *"I really value our relationship and hope we can work things out."* This often helps the other person to feel less guarded about having the conversation.

If a great deal of time has passed or there is concern that someone might be uncooperative, I urge team members to say something like, *"I've hesitated to bring this up before, because I honestly didn't know how or where to begin,"* or *"I was concerned about possibly upsetting you,"* or *"I wasn't sure if you'd be willing to talk with me about it."* This way they're being upfront about their fears, which actually decreases the chances these things might happen. Also, explaining that the goal is to "gain more clarity" about the situation helps others relax, because this makes it more about what one person needs, and lessens the fear that the other person will be attacked or blamed.

I always emphasize the importance of timing. Many discussions escalate into confrontations when people are emotionally charged or upset. It is far better to wait (a day or two at most; otherwise, the "story" gets distorted) than to say something you may really regret. Another of my favorite conflict-related quotes is by American author Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914): *"Speak when you're angry and you'll make the best speech you will ever regret!"*

If both parties are willing, I recommend setting aside time after work or, if possible, going out to lunch to talk about the situation. The problem-solving conflict resolution model I use emphasizes avoidance of the word "you" and the use of "absolutes" such as *"you always"* or *"you never."* Instead, I suggest that individuals learn to acknowledge their unmet needs and feelings and find a way to talk about them that won't increase hostility.

I also strongly urge people to consider the unmet needs and feelings of the other person involved in the conflict. I use a conflict resolution worksheet to help team members process this information. As much as we may not enjoy having to do this (because we're often attached to being right and blaming others for our upset), if we really want to resolve the conflict, we have to be willing to understand the other person's point of view and listen without interrupting. If you appear to be concerned only about yourself, the other person will tune you out. Author Steven Covey has said, *"Most of us listen to reply, not to understand,"* and I agree with him. Think about your last conflict—did you listen to understand, or were you mostly impatient to get your thoughts across, as most of us are?

These two steps—broaching the subject and then finding a way to talk about it calmly—

are usually enough to work things out.

HF: *What do you mean when you say, "Resolving conflict is simple, is just isn't always easy"?*

MO: Actually, the steps for resolving conflict really are easy: You stop. You create a space in time to reflect on what's happening to you (what needs are going unmet, and how you feel about the situation). Essentially, you are seeking first to understand yourself; then, if the other person is willing, you also get the opportunity to understand their point of view.

If you both do this from a "centered" state, you will most likely remedy the problem or clear up any misunderstandings. The real challenge is that most of us are not centered when we're conflicted, because any kind of perceived threat (and that can simply be someone giving us "the look") often triggers the fight/flight response in us. So, instead of talking about things, we often want to head for the hills or punch someone in the nose! Really, the toughest task is learning to calm ourselves down so we can think clearly. When we've cooled down, we can ask ourselves questions

such as, "What is my intention here?" "Do I want to prove that I'm right and they're wrong?" or "Am I trying to preserve this relationship or destroy it?"

Answers to these questions should help to guide your behavior. You may very well discover that a conceptual shift in your own thinking and behavior has to occur in order to restore peace.

That's why I say that conflict resolution is simple, yet it isn't always easy. I am essentially asking people to bridge the gap between their humanity and their profession and commit to becoming peacemakers. Remaking ourselves in this way isn't an easy process. Yet I know it can be done.

With practice, patience, and the right intention, conflict resolution does get easier. In my work as a psychotherapist and as a trainer and coach to the "dental family," I have personally seen hundreds of relationships improve and dental practices thrive, as a result of hard work and a commitment to personal and professional development.

We have dozens of opportunities every single day to "get things right"; I call these

"groundhog moments." Bill Murray's character in the film "Groundhog Day," Phil, is stuck in a particular day until he gets things right. Phil has to learn to communicate more honestly, sincerely, and effectively before he can move on. Just imagine if that were the case in your practice!

HF: *What will attendees learn at your workshop at the AACD's Annual Scientific Session on March 8th in New Orleans?*

MO: I will go into much more depth about what I have discussed here, and will teach a simple four-step method for resolving conflict. I'll also walk people through this system so they will know how to motivate team members to address conflicts, utilizing my conflict resolution worksheet. They'll learn ways to communicate more effectively about conflict, how to deal with difficult emotions, and how to cool down when conflict heats up.

I will also be conducting some role-playing, so I'll be looking for a few volunteers!

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