

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP

Ron Strieker, Ph.D.

When coaching leaders in today's busy and complex healthcare environment, issues of conflict are ever present. Leaders are faced with situations ranging from patient care to operational cost and control. Conflict is often present as these leaders manage this dynamic environment and/or lead change towards new horizons. Research has shown, that leaders who manage conflict effectively tend to be most successful and conversely those leaders who handle conflict poorly tend to struggle especially in the areas of team development and implementing strategies for change. Researchers have found that collaboration and working effectively across functional boundaries is the key for senior managers to address change and manage conflict effectively (Wiess and Hughes, 2005).

It is often said that leaders influence relevant change. Individuals tend to resist and at times fight against change, however and hold on to patterns of behavior and beliefs they have held for long periods of time. They become accustomed to and comfortable with these patterns and change becomes a threat. These threats trigger conflict and resistance to change resulting in stagnation and missed opportunities. The consequence is the organization becomes resistant to change and fails to adapt to the world around it. With all the changes going on today in healthcare, this can have disastrous effects. Managing conflict, therefore can be essential to effectively moving the organization forward.

There are ways for leaders to address the issues of conflict, however, and it begins with awareness. Understanding the cause and triggers for conflict provides the leader with a perspective that is constructive and positive. One diagnostic approach to developing this awareness has been developed by Capobianco, Davis and Krause and is called the *Conflict Dynamics Profile* or CDP (2007). They describe in detail constructive, destructive and hot button responses to conflict and provide leaders with a roadmap for understanding and responding to conflict effectively. In their words:

"Thus, conflict in life is inevitable. Despite our best efforts to prevent it, we inevitably find ourselves in disagreements with other people at times. This is not, however, necessarily bad. Some kinds of conflict can be productive--differing points of view can lead to creative solutions to problems. What largely separates useful conflict from destructive conflict is how the individuals respond when the conflict occurs. Thus, while conflict itself is inevitable, ineffective and harmful responses to conflict can be avoided, and effective and beneficial responses to conflict can be learned." (Capobianco, Davis and Krause, 2007).

They propose channeling the conflict towards the constructive realm using the following pathways:

Perspective Taking	Putting yourself in the other person's position and trying to understand that person's point of view.
Creating Solutions	Brainstorming with the other person, asking questions, and trying to create solutions to the problem.
Expressing Emotions	Talking honestly with the other person and expressing your thoughts and feelings.
Reaching Out	Reaching out to the other person, making the first move, and trying to make amends.
Reflective Thinking	Analyzing the situation, weighing the pros and cons, and thinking about the best response.
Delay Responding	Waiting things out, letting matters settle down, or taking a "time out" when emotions are running high.
Adapting	Staying flexible, and trying to make the best of the situation.

As leaders personally develop these skills and those around them they begin to show how conflict can be resolved constructively. This leads to a healthy and productive pattern for handling stress.

The other side of the equation, however, is much more negative and destructive in nature and can be called the “dark side” of responding to stress. These responses often escalate stress in the relationship and deepen the lack of trust and productive behavior.

Winning at All Costs	Arguing vigorously for your own position and trying to win at all costs.
Displaying Anger	Expressing anger, raising your voice, and using harsh, angry words.
Demeaning Others	Laughing at the other person, ridiculing the other's ideas, and using sarcasm.
Retaliating	Obstructing the other person, retaliating against the other, and trying to get revenge.
Avoiding	Avoiding or ignoring the other person, and acting distant and aloof.
Yielding	Giving in to the other person in order to avoid further conflict.
Hiding Emotions	Concealing your true emotions even though feeling upset.
Self-Criticizing	Replaying the incident over in your mind, and criticizing yourself for not handling it better.

When leaders fall into these destructive patterns, conflict escalates and deepens. Trust in the relationship is often lost and when trust is lost it is very difficult to restore. In addition, these response patterns can harden and be easily triggered making it even more difficult for the leader to change.

Case Study

A physician leader was struggling with his fellow partners in the practice and conflict seemed to exist in every discussion and group meeting. He seemed to work better with his team, however, certain team members were also beginning to find working with him difficult and contentious. This was particularly true during times of disagreement. For instance, expressing a differing opinion on a patient care issue. The disagreement became personal and negative instead of simply providing an alternative point of view.

Coaching was recommended for the physician to better understand his communication, collaboration and trust patterns with the partners and his team. In addition to a leadership style assessment and a 360; the coach also provided the *Conflict Dynamics Profile* to better understand his response to conflict and how it was affecting his relationships with his team and others.

This assessment suite provided a great deal of awareness for the physician leader in relation to his patterns of communication, collaboration and trust with others and became the foundation from which a development plan with specific actions was established. He found this information very insightful and assisted him in the process of change. Together with his team and fellow partners, he worked diligently on changing certain destructive behaviors in response to conflict that were significantly reducing his capacity to lead. He learned that when conflict was triggered, instead of responding negatively, he could attain his goal and move the process forward without the destructive consequences. Relationships improved as did his capacity to lead and influence change.

In the *Upside of Stress*, (2015) Kelly McGonigal discusses at length the struggles that individuals have with stress as they try to avoid it completely or only see it as a negative. She emphasizes that when stress is handled in this way stress becomes the enemy. She found that stress was having harmful physical effects on individuals driven by their belief systems. They believed that stress was harmful, which in turn made them ill. Because beliefs are powerful drivers of

behavior, it became very important to be aware of these tendencies and look for positive change. McGonigal in her work has shown the “upside” of stress can be channeled in a positive constructive way. So, too when working with the physician leader, he began to see the upside of stress, with the aid of the CDP, and how he could make stress work positively for himself, the partners and the team.

Conclusion

Stress is an everyday factor that all leaders face in the complex world of healthcare. When stress is handled constructively by the leader, the effective is often positive and productive. Conversely, when the leader chooses a more destructive response, the consequences are often negative and unproductive. It’s the negative response to stress that often leads to poor leadership, and in those cases where the response prevails, could lead to derailment. Patterns, such as these, need to be changed in the short-term if the leader is to continue to influence relevant change in the organization. Awareness of how the leader handles and responds to stress proves to be very helpful personally and for the team. It is through awareness, commitment to change and finally execution (actions) that the patterns towards constructive positive responses to conflict become the norm for the leader and continued success.

References

- Capobianco, S., Davis, M., and Krause, L. (2007). Conflict Dynamics Profile.
- McGonigal, K. (2015). The Upside of Stress, New York, New York: Penguin Random House.
- Weiss, J. and Hughes, J. (2005). Harvard Business Review, (March, pp. 1-11).