

How to ease conflict and experience greater harmony at work

By Maude McGill, PhD, MSN, RN-BC

Better self-understanding can help lessen tension with coworkers.

JEANETTE manages to beat traffic, clock-in on time, and begin her day. Everything is running smoothly. Then she and another nurse argue over who should take the next admission. Both of them already have full patient loads. Throughout the day, several more admissions and discharges take place, but Jeanette can't get her mind off this dispute. "It's going to be a long day," she says to herself.

Workplace conflicts such as Jeanette's experience are common. Individuals bring different personalities, perspectives, and expectations regarding behavior to the workplace and, as a result, disagree. On-the-job relationships may deteriorate because healthcare team members:

- see things differently
- think differently
- have different expectations regarding the outcome of events.

Understanding why conflict occurs and how to help resolve it can improve your relationships with colleagues, increase your team's effectiveness, enhance the quality of patient care, and improve outcomes. You, like every nurse, have an important role to play in resolving workplace conflicts.

Getting to know yourself

"Who am I?" isn't an easy question to answer. Many factors merge to form each person's personality, such as genetics, background, environment, self-image, and desires and goals. Internal and external variables also influence behavior. These countless variations make it likely that, at some point, you'll find yourself in a chal-

lenging situation that you perceive differently than your colleagues, thereby setting off a conflict.

When a conflict occurs, what role do you play? Improving self-awareness takes time but is worth the effort. Throughout our fast-paced lives, we grow accustomed to reacting rather than reflecting. Decisions are made. Outcomes are achieved. We think the incident is over, but have we stopped to reflect on its significance?

Take time to evaluate how you handle situations and communicate with others. After an incident is resolved, ask yourself: Did I handle it in the most effective way possible? Were my actions appropriate? Did I communicate effectively? Going through this process will help you get to know yourself.



Digging deeper

Consider going beyond examining your behavior to looking at your inner self. Understanding your internal motivations will help you better understand your response patterns in a conflict, as well as your colleagues' behavior.

- **Background.** Think about your parents and the values you acquired during childhood. How do these values shape your decision making, communication style, and approach to resolving conflicts today?
- **Environment.** Your environment plays a role in how you respond to conflict. Consider both the environment you grew up in and your current environment. For example, if you're accustomed to a hostile environment, a colleague who speaks in a loud voice and uses an abrupt tone may not affect you. However, if you're accustomed to a calm environment, you may take offense at this colleague's style.
- **Self-image.** How do you see yourself? Do you perceive yourself as a work in progress, willing to grow? Do you see yourself as competent?
- **Inner desire.** Where do you want to be in life? Are you happy with your current work conditions?

Answering these questions can play a vital role in guiding your conduct in the workplace. Once you understand your own personality and become aware of

A tool to better understand yourself and others

Using an established conceptual framework can help you put your own motivations and behavior in perspective, as well as better understand your coworkers. The model used in the Keirsey Temperament Sorter is summarized below. Which temperament most closely matches your own? With which temperament are you most likely to come into conflict? When conflict arises, take a moment to consider where you and your colleagues are coming from before anger and resentment take over.

Temperament	Motivation	Perspectives on the workplace
Idealist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respects cooperation and diplomacy • Values harmony and individual growth • Is loyal to the needs of individuals within own sphere 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views the workplace as an opportunity for interdependent effort • Sees potential in all people and ideas
Guardian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respects authority • Values established processes, proven methods, and working through proper channels • Is loyal to the organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views the workplace as a hierarchical establishment • Feels rules and regulations are necessary to achieve concrete outcomes
Artisan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respects results and productivity • Values justification of actions and despises excuses • Is loyal to personal relationships but will put relationships aside during competition; desires to win 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has utilitarian view of the workplace • Is results-driven and goal oriented
Rational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respects competency and expertise • Values efficiency and is willing to question the status quo to improve efficiency • Is loyal to the goal of finding a better way despite organizational and individual roadblocks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views the workplace setting as striving toward efficiency • Expects colleagues to be competent individuals, motivated to achieve outcomes • Is always looking for ways to improve quality by any rational means

your values and expectations, you can identify areas where you can improve your conduct. Self-awareness makes it easier to self-monitor your behavior, thereby fostering positive work relationships.

Once you understand yourself and how you can better handle situations, you can begin to understand your colleagues' motivations. You can teach yourself to appreciate the reasons why they act the way they do.

Understanding people's motivations can help separate behavior-related issues from the underlying source of tension. Rather than react emotionally to their behavior, you can respond based on an understanding of their perspectives and interests. Greater objectivity can create a healthier work environment.

Sorting out personalities

A personality assessment tool offers one way to better understand your temperament and may provide insight into your colleagues' behavior. For example, the Keirsey Temperament Sorter asks a series of questions to help identify personal values in an organizational setting. To take this personality assessment, visit www.keirsey.com/sorter/register.aspx. (See *A tool to better understand yourself and others*.)

Based on the work of David Keirsey, here is a simple but useful conceptual framework for addressing workplace conflicts. It identifies basic personality types

you encounter in the workplace and suggests ways to best communicate with them.

The idealist: Looking for meaning

Nurses with the idealist temperament are driven by a sense of purpose and seek the meaning behind actions. They are driven by ideas. They value connection and interactions in the workplace setting. They feel threatened if harmony is not achieved. Idealists have an intuitive talent for bringing disparate people together and creating a mutual understanding among them.

When working with colleagues with this temperament, communicate in ways that give meaning to actions. Focus on ideas. Stress opportunities for growth and development and creating value when addressing workplace issues.

The guardian: Seeking order

This temperament is characterized by respect for authority. Nurses with the guardian temperament are motivated by rules and regulations and value policies and procedures. They feel threatened if regulations aren't strictly followed. These nurses use a step-by-step approach to address workplace issues and rely on past experiences to guide them.

When working with colleagues with the guardian temperament, use a structured approach to communi-

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ation and provide details about how the process you advocate will achieve results.

The artisan: Thriving on productivity

Nurses with this temperament are expressive, enjoy defining their personal style, and thrive on productivity. They are opportunistic by nature, enjoy risk-taking, and can easily get bored at work if a process is prolonged. These nurses embrace change and the idea of trying new things and are good at visualizing the end-goal.

When working with colleagues with the artisan temperament, keep communication straightforward and direct. Be as brief as possible. Use practical demonstrations to advocate for your ideas.

The rational temperament: Focus on the intellect

Nurses with a rational temperament thrive on their intellectual ability and conceptual thinking skills. They aren't satisfied with taking an answer at face value; they want to understand the logic behind each decision. They want a clear sense of vision and strategy, backed by facts. These nurses also have an innate desire to improve processes and can be invaluable in implementing quality-improvement measures.

When working with colleagues with a rational temperament, use descriptive language in your speech and writing. Don't shy away from complex ideas. Stimulate their interest. Be sure to include facts that will help validate the logic behind the approach you advocate.

Applying the nursing process to conflict resolution

Here are five steps to help you resolve workplace conflict:

1. **Assessment**—Assess yourself.
2. **Diagnosis**—Diagnose your temperament and the temperament of colleagues with whom you are in conflict.
3. **Outcomes**—Focus on your goal in resolving the conflict; what are you trying to achieve in addition to creating a more harmonious work environment?
4. **Implementation**—Implement effective communication techniques and strategies to improve workplace effectiveness and enhance working relationships.
5. **Evaluation**—Evaluate effectiveness: Did you successfully achieve your desired outcome?

Conflicts are inevitable, in human relationships and in the workplace, but fortunately, we have the power to resolve them. ★

Visit www.americannursetoday.com/?p=25186 for a list of selected references.

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