

The Exchange Strategy for Managing Conflict in Health Care

Steven P. Dinkin, Barbara Filner, and Lisa Maxwell

This excerpt from the book, The Exchange Strategy for Managing Conflict in Health Care: How to Defuse Emotions and Create Solutions When the Stakes Are High, introduces a strategic process for acknowledging and addressing conflict in the healthcare setting.

Healthcare is a high-stakes business. Whether you work for a hospital, a doctor's office, or some other healthcare facility, you know people's lives are on the line every day. Failure is *not* an option. And the pressure to succeed combined with the stress of caring for patients and families, the regulations you must meet, and the many other challenges healthcare professionals face can lead to a big problem, *conflict*.

The impact of conflict gets expressed in many ways:

- A domineering, controlling administrator criticizes others in public settings.

The Outcome: A crippling of creative thinking. Why bother?

- Nurses argue about protocol at the bedside of a dying patient.

The Outcome: Increased anxiety about the end of life for the patient, loss of confidence by the family, fractured treatment.

- A physician's assistant leaves incomplete notes in the patient's chart.

The Outcome: Potential patient harm; increased exposure to malpractice liability; extra time and effort are required to provide the best care.

- Members of a surgical team don't communicate clearly or at all.

The Outcome: Compromised patient care.

The healthcare industry is currently under a microscope. As if the pressure and demands of new technology, sicker patients, and growing bureaucracy are not enough, everyone has become an instant expert on how to "fix" the

system. It's no surprise that healthcare workers may be feeling more tension or experiencing more conflicts. The system is changing. One critical difference, however, between providers who consistently deliver high-quality care with high ratings for patient safety and those who don't is how quickly and how effectively they acknowledge problems or conflicts and how they choose to address them. If not addressed early and productively, the outcome of these ignored conflicts can be detrimental to patients, families, physicians, staff, and the organization.

It's not fair!

Don't tell her I told you, but she ...

I can't work with him!

She yelled at me in front of patients!

What is a manager to do when he or she hears these complaints from staff? Though a natural reaction is to either simply avoid the complaints altogether or tell employees to go back to work, neither of these approaches tend to work very well. What most managers want is for their staff to treat each other with respect, work cooperatively, and focus on excellent patient care.

The question is, how can an organization create a positive work environment and help channel the staff's energy toward contributing, instead of petty infighting or other disruptive behavior? One thing is known to be true—the more a manager ignores or tries to squash the problem, the more it tends to escalate and the more complaining increases. As a French philosopher once said, "Everything has been said before, but since no one listens, we have to begin all over again." Employees, like most other people, don't like to be ignored or told their concerns and reactions to a situation are wrong, bad, or inappropriate. In the busy reality of delivering patient care, it may feel as though one does not have time to manage a conflict or to listen to employees' concerns. The cost of not listening to

Why the Exchange Strategy Is Different

The responsibility for managing a conflict belongs to all of the parties who have a stake in resolving it, including the relevant manager. The Exchange gives a leader new interpersonal skills to facilitate a joint resolution of the whole conflict, engaging all parties in doing it, and building more collaborative behaviors among them by doing so.

It is built around a practical, sequential process that takes the parties to the best possible outcome, with language that becomes part of the culture to provide better collaborative skills and behaviors.

Emotions are important, not just touchy-feely distractions, and they need to be taken into account. They are messy, powerful, and scary elements that tend to overpower or repel attempts to resolve conflicts on a tidy, rational level. The proven techniques developed by NCRC over 30 years allow any leader to constructively and respectfully use these emotional energies to increase understanding, respect, and empathy among the parties that then becomes the basis for lasting positive change.

The Exchange Four-Stage Model

Stage One is a private, one-on-one meeting with each party in the identified conflict. It is an opportunity to hear, in a safe setting, how each individual perceives the situation and to let each know what will follow as the process unwinds.

Stage Two is a private planning stage for the facilitator for developing an agenda.

Stage Three is a meeting with all the participants from Stage One. The facilitator uses the agenda constructed in Stage Two to conduct a strategic, three-way discussion with the goal of increasing each party's understanding, not only of his or her own role, but also of how the other sees the situation, and the conflict's impact on the workplace as a whole.

Stage Four is the problem-solving stage in which everyone participates to explore options and develop a lasting solution to the situation. The leader facilitates this by encouraging all to buy in, by writing up an action plan, and by following up to see that all stay invested in the resolution.

The ART of Communication

The ART of Communication is a basic set of communication skills that help parties exchange feedback on behavior that may be causing or may lead to a conflict. The skills are used and modeled by the leader in an Exchange, and the parties through the leader's guidance use the skills to demonstrate understanding of the other parties' emotions, interests, and needs.

ART stands for:

Aikido in Action

An Aikidoist is a martial arts expert who puts a pause between action and reaction

Be nonreactive, let go of your ego

Consider the other's point of view before addressing them

Effectively listen

See it as an opportunity to improve your relationship

Respond Respectfully

Demonstrate understanding, acknowledge emotions, identify interests

Ask open-ended questions if unclear

Tell your perspective in a nonconfrontational way

Troubleshoot Together

Problem solve a resolution

Make sure everyone's needs are met

End on a positive note

employees' concerns is great: escalation of issues, avoidance of other staff with whom they have a conflict, increased absenteeism, losing focus at work, and possibly patient harm; all of these are real consequences of workplace conflict.

Finding a way to respond respectfully and to hear the underlying interests, instead of focusing on the complaints, takes practice. What these skills can do is transform the workplace into one in which people work collaboratively and respectfully together. Having a structured conflict management strategy is an essential leadership tool which can also transform a dysfunctional team to a thriving one.

The Exchange Strategy for Managing Conflict in Health Care supports managers and supervisors, at every level of the organization, in the challenging work of managing conflict and disruptive behavior in the workplace. Fortunately, most employees do the right thing and are committed to improving, so the atmosphere is generally professional and positive. But even the best employees can sometimes find themselves in workplace conflicts for which they could use some help. Given that fact, many organizations have embarked on this training and support it for good reason: Ignoring the problem does not solve it. In fact, it exacerbates the problem. The employees in conflict (or the employee who creates a "toxic environment" in the workplace) can create a negative atmosphere for their coworkers and even impact patient care.

High turnover rates are costly. When more people are let go from their jobs because of behavioral problems than competency issues, the cost to the organization is great and can be prevented in many cases.

The Joint Commission (the accrediting body for U.S. healthcare institutions) is mandating that hospitals manage conflict in a way that healthcare safety and quality are protected (Standard LD.2.40). Additionally, leaders are to create a culture of safety, based on teamwork and respect, which means disruptive behavior by individuals must be addressed (Standard LD.03.01.01).

The Exchange program is based on state-of-the-art methodology for managing conflict productively and respectfully. Combining the

tools of leadership, adherence to policy, and working from an interest-based perspective, managers learn how to work through the inevitable issues that arise in the workplace.

As one manager stated, *"I thought that I was going to learn about conflict management, but I have learned good tips for communicating better with my staff on an ongoing basis."*

Successful management of conflicts and disruptive behavior helps the overall mission, vision, and values of any organization. It also helps one reduce stress, manage in a more positive manner, and see other positive outcomes for employees.

The Exchange program can help create a safe, efficient, smooth-running organization. Over the past 12 months, more than 450 managers and supervisors on my team at Sanford Health have gone through this training, and it works! The healthcare industry has needed a strategic process like The Exchange for many years, and I am relieved to know that we finally have a professional, well-organized process to refer to when conflicts arise in our hospitals and clinics. The Exchange is all about results. Use it at your organization and be prepared to see more efficient, less stressed employees, and, most importantly, happier, healthier patients.

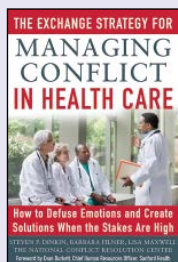
Evan Burkett
Chief Human Resources Officer,
Sanford Health

Chapter II Excerpt: The Exchange—A Proven Approach to Conflict Resolution

At St. Sonia's (a fictional healthcare system used by the authors to illustrate The Exchange in action), The Exchange process is a key part of their integrated conflict management system (ICMS). For those unfamiliar with the concept of ICMS, it is a graduated system for addressing conflicts.

At its lowest level only the disputing parties are involved. Individuals are encouraged to make an effort to speak to the person they perceive has offended them. Because of this, many organizations that have an ICMS system of conflict resolution offer communication skills workshops so employees will be able to gain skills in giving and receiving effective feedback.

The Exchange Strategy for Managing Conflict in Health Care: How to Defuse Emotions and Create Solutions When the Stakes Are High



Authors: Steven P. Dinkin, Barbara Filner, and Lisa Maxwell

Abstract: Steven P. Dinkin, director of the National Conflict Resolution Center, described the purpose of this book as follows: "This book is written for healthcare profes-

sionals of all levels who are concerned with the negative impact dysfunctional workplace relationships have on patient safety and satisfaction, operational quality, and reimbursement. Research confirms that organizational excellence comes from a workplace environment that fosters quality personal relationships

between employees. *The Exchange Strategy for Managing Conflict in Health Care* discusses the sources and nature of workplace conflict, teaches specific interaction skills and a pragmatic four-stage process for using them, and uses relevant narrative to show how respectful and trustworthy exchanges of understanding between people reduce conflict, increase communication and lead to better collaboration and teamwork."

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The Exchange is an ideal process for the next step: If this one-on-one discussion is not successful or is not attempted, people can contact their supervisor or manager, who convenes and facilitates an Exchange process. At times, neither employee has initiated a conflict resolution process but the manager sees a need to convene one. Most disputes are resolved at this point but there are other levels available should they be needed, including professional mediation by an outside neutral.

Many healthcare facilities, corporate businesses, schools, and other institutions have adopted such a system as a way to manage the conflicts that occur in every workplace. We're talking about the kinds of conflicts that, if not addressed, result in enormous costs, both financial and personal. High staff turnover, low morale, and the expenses associated with litigation lead to a poor work product and an unacceptable bottom line, all results of unaddressed conflict or mismanaged conflict resolution procedures. In the healthcare industry, the fundamental concern of patient safety may be threatened by these conflicts.

There have been studies to indicate that such conflicts, which are most often rooted in

miscommunication or lack of communication, can even lead to medical mistakes. Accidents and resulting errors happen and will always happen when human beings are involved, but some errors are not accidents. Errors caused by lack of a clear understanding of what is needed or by the inability of individuals to speak up constructively for themselves in an inherently hierarchical culture are not inevitable. It is possible to greatly reduce their occurrence by introducing new protocols of respectful communication, together with new processes that deal with conflicts stemming from communication failures. The Exchange, including the techniques it utilizes, is one of those processes; one that empowers employees at all levels and has had demonstrable success.

In recognition of the importance of managing conflict, The Joint Commission, in 2009, issued a recommendation that has been heralded and implemented by conscientious healthcare providers throughout the country (see Appendix B). St. Sonia's is no exception.

The good news is that chronic, low-level conflicts *can* be dealt with respectfully and successfully. There is dignity and self-respect in

dealing with an issue and speaking up for oneself through a structured process that is balanced, fair, and learnable. We call that structured process The Exchange. And we have found it works in a variety of situations, from a manager and two employees to inter and intra-departmental disputes, to one-on-one situations of disruptive employees (or bosses) and even to personal burnout. The techniques also work with spouses, partners, and kids! If it sounds like magic, be assured that it isn't. The skills take practice to master; the structure requires focus; and above all, the participants have to demonstrate at least a modicum of good faith as they work to address the issues that are part of the conflict.

The Inspiration. The idea of The Exchange originated with the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) in San Diego, CA, which for many years focused solely on mediation. In 1983, NCRC, as the San Diego Mediation Center, developed an internationally recognized structure for the practice of mediation. While there are many models, mediation is essentially a process whereby an outside neutral without a personal stake in the outcome sits down with disputing parties and works with them to develop an agreement or settlement that everyone can live with. Mediation sessions typically last from two hours to several days. Professional mediators have years of training and experience to master their skills.

Key to the NCRC mediation model is Stage Three. It consists of a conversation, carefully structured by the mediator, between the disputing parties, and it is truly an "exchange" on several levels. First, it includes an *exchange of information*: what the "facts" are from each point of view. Then, the mediator helps the parties in an *exchange of understanding*. This is critical and at the heart of making real resolution possible. The idea is for each party to understand the impact of the conflict on the other—*how* the conflict has affected each person. At this point, the focus is not yet on agreement, instead on understanding and acceptance that each party was affected. Next is an opportunity for an *exchange of expectations*—what action or reaction did each party hope for or want in the situation

that occurred? And finally, after the *exchange of understanding*, there is an *exchange of ideas* on how to resolve or handle the conflict.

NCRC's mediation trainers have recognized over the years that it is not necessary to be a professional mediator to make use of the key communication skills of good mediators, skills that are most clearly demonstrated during the "exchange" stage of a mediation. These skills are ones that can be taught and learned by most individuals who are interested in learning them. Further, not everyone is in a position to be perceived as "neutral." The requirement for developing the skills is an ability to withhold judgment and to actually listen to how others perceive a situation. The skills can be used effectively even by those who have a stake in the outcome of a situation. From this recognition came the idea of taking the skills of mediators into workplaces and into the community in the form of a new process called The Exchange.

NCRC has also been inspired by working with good managers in all industries. Many successful managers demonstrate their **power** through good leadership skills, utilize a command of workplace **rights** by fairly enforcing policies, and care enough about their staff to take into consideration the employees' workplace **interests** in the problem-solving process. This deft use of three approaches to resolving conflicts (power, rights, and interests), as described by Harvard negotiators Roger Fisher and William Ury in their seminal work *Getting to Yes*, are not easy to keep in balance. Yet, in settling workplace conflicts, unlike in pure negotiation or facilitative mediation, managers have the responsibility to utilize all three approaches as they manage their departments, depending on the situation that has arisen. We are impressed with those managers who have shown us that it is not only possible, but also highly beneficial, to strategically utilize **power**, **rights**, and **interests** successfully. The Exchange approach helps managers learn to balance these three elements and to emulate the successful managers we have observed.

Because so many levels of interaction exist in healthcare and so many different professional skills are involved, the healthcare industry is

a perfect setting for The Exchange. Physicians, nursing staff, technicians, administrators, aides, cafeteria workers, support staff, and others—all require different training, use different technical or professional “languages” to communicate, and have different expectations and ideas about each other. Added to the mix is the actual work of healthcare—the healing present in most medical facilities. All of this makes fertile ground for misunderstanding and for conflicts. Hospital leadership teams are in an excellent position to qualify as conflict managers because they are the ones to whom others complain and who by virtue of their positions are most often held responsible.

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About the National Conflict Resolution Center

The NCRC has provided mediation, facilitation, and conflict resolution training since 1983. Headquartered in San Diego, CA, NCRC is one of the largest full-service conflict resolution centers in the United States. NCRC has trained thousands of people to resolve disputes in legal, corporate, community, healthcare, and family settings. Its motto is, “There is a solution.”

About the Book

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About the Exchange

To learn more about the The Exchange Training for Health Care visit our website at: <http://www.exchangetraining.com/programs/healthcare/?phpMyAdmin=x0dX71I5M%2C%2CQS4yCbcb40Lq8Fm4>.



Steven P. Dinkin

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Lisa Maxwell

Lisa Maxwell has mediated with NCRC since 1985, and is currently the director of the Training Institute at NCRC. She has extensive experience assisting groups in dealing with conflict and managing workplace disputes. She has worked with large healthcare systems, the military, government agencies, and corporations in customizing The Exchange training for specific organizations and cultures. Her email address is lmaxwell@ncrconline.com.

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