

Practical Tips for Mediating Team Conflict

Saye Clement, DVM

We all have times when we don't see eye to eye with our co-workers. How we choose to handle these types of conflicts will greatly impact the quality of our working relationships. Sometimes, when you're embroiled in conflict, there isn't an easy or clear solution; and for some team members, it can be difficult to see the forest for the trees.

As leaders, it is up to us to provide clear and fair rules of engagement, so let's start by thinking about the big picture. As a leader in the practice, you are obligated to define and live a personal culture which is exemplary. That can be a big challenge for some of us, and there's no rationalization allowed for not living up to your end of the bargain. It's not fair for there to be a double standard in the practice, and if a manager or owner is unable to perform to the level that they are asking of their team, the team is destined to fail. Lead by example. Once your practice culture is firmly in place, the next step is to define behavioral expectations for individuals, and insist upon accountability. Finally, your team needs to be evaluated on their adherence to behavioral expectations in their performance reviews.

A word or two about performance reviews: In a perfect world, when we have reviews with our team members, we create plans for developing and improving their skills. You should consider (and believe!) that conflict resolution is a skill that can be taught and learned. It needs to be evaluated (along with other cultural criteria) in performance reviews. It should be afforded the same time and energy for development as any other skill (you wouldn't tolerate a veterinarian who couldn't spay a cat in a feline-only practice, in the same vein, you shouldn't tolerate a team member who refuses to learn basic conflict management skills and attempt to use them). Adherence to a clinic culture which fosters communication and a willingness to learn new skills forms the basis for resolving interpersonal conflicts.

In the short term – because I don't want you to go home and fire everyone:

- 1** Develop a standard operating protocol for conflict resolution. This should include whether you want team members to attempt to resolve an issue first, with an expectation that you will assist if needed. This should also give them guidelines for how to have the conversation (listening, mirroring, accounting for different communication styles, avoiding assumptions).
- 2** Get agreement from the team for your expectations for conflict resolution. Outline what is expected. Also, outline what won't be tolerated (abusive talk, acknowledging there is a problem but refusing to attempt to resolve it, etc.).
- 3** Leaders in the practice must follow 1 & 2 to the letter. (If you haven't always done so, then you need to come clean with your team that you're turning over a new leaf and will need some help from them to stay on track).
- 4** Have a plan for managing your time and how you will incorporate coaching into your schedule (or someone else's).

Practical Tips for Mediating Team Conflicts Worksheet

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OBJECTIVES

My ultimate goal is to give you a practical plan so your team can resolve the majority of their interpersonal conflicts without intervention from management. Since that's a long-term project, we will also cover some tips you can use as soon as you get home!

TOOL KIT

THE BIG PLAN

- Clearly define your practice culture
- Evaluate team members for adherence to culture (start with yourself!)
- Clearly define behavioral expectations and implement accountability
- Include an evaluation of personal culture and conflict resolution in reviews

BEGINNING STEPS

- Expectations for reporting issues
- Two sides to each story – internal clients
- How to coach (and who should do it)
- Finding time

PITFALLS

- When you assume
- Letting things build up
- Individual communication style
- Team members with poor cultural fit

KEY POINTS

80/20 rule...

Don't spend 80% of your time with troublemakers!

Prioritize cultural fit over skills!