

Dealing with the effects of conflict

In the previous paper in this series we identified role of good communication in preventing the escalation of conflict (Ellis, 2022a). In this paper we will explore some of the effects of repeated conflict and strategies for managing them in the health and social care setting.

KEY WORDS

- » Conflict
- » Distress
- » Emotional intelligence
- » Emotions,
- » Stress
- » Support
- » Supervision

In the previous paper in this series we identified role of good communication in preventing the escalation of conflict (Ellis, 2022a). We saw that communication requires the healthcare professional to engage in active listening perhaps more than in talking. We identified how negotiation as a tool for resolving conflict enables all parties involved to come to a compromise and identified the stages through which this might be achieved.

We also discussed the role of mediation and arbitration using a third party and how this can be useful in resolving conflicts where the parties involved have failed to settle by communication and negotiation.

Even if we take the view that conflict should be regarded in a positive light and as a tool for driving change and development (Moreland and Apker, 2015), there is little doubt that it can leave healthcare professionals emotionally and physically drained, especially when it occurs regularly or there is a particularly difficult or challenging occurrence. In this paper we will explore some of the effects of repeated conflict and strategies for managing them in the health and social care setting.

Impact of conflict on staff

There are some care environments where the risks of conflict and even violence are ever present. In their review of the literature, Aljohani et al (2021) identified how violence and aggression are commonplace in emergency departments across the world, affecting the whole workforce including doctors and nurses. Notably, they identify how family members and friends are responsible for more incidents than patients themselves (Aljohani et al, 2021). While many other commentators, Yragui et al (2017) among them, identify mental health care environments as among those that experience the most episodes of conflict.

In their survey of nurses working in emergency departments in Turkey, Pinar and Ucmak (2011) identified increased sickness absence and ongoing feelings of not being safe arising from experiences of violence in the workplace, while Hamdan and Hamra (2017) identify burnout and the intention to leave work as the dominant impacts of experiencing conflict in the emergency department.

Other research suggests the impact of conflict and workplace violence can be more widespread for nurses and might include issues affecting the person physically, mentally, socially and professionally (Hassankhani et al, 2018) including issues with anxiety and ongoing depression (Maran et al, 2018).

While not relating to care setting specifically, the Health and Safety Executive (2022) identify several consequences for staff arising from incidents that involve violence or verbal aggression, these include:

- » Loss of confidence
- » Insomnia
- » Anger
- » Anxiety and depression
- » Poor concentration
- » Absenteeism
- » Feeling incompetent
- » The overuse of alcohol, caffeine and medication.

Different people react in different ways to the same levels of conflict. The different response may reflect things like differences in training and previous experiences of conflict or whether individuals are repeatedly exposed to the same issues. These effects are some of the reasons why managers should give attention to the support and development of staff so that they can better prevent, manage and deal with the aftermath of episodes of conflict in health and social care settings. Failure to understand the impact of conflict and the effects it has on people may mean managers fail in their duty of care toward staff.

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Training

As with many things, one of the best ways to help staff manage the effects of conflict is to provide education and training that enables staff to understand the causes of stress, which often gives rise to conflict, among patients and family members as well as how to manage conflict, and deescalate issues, when they arise. Heckmann et al (2015) in their narrative review identified how, while conflict management training did not reduce the incidence of aggression in acute hospital settings, staff reported improvements in their confidence, attitude towards and skills and knowledge regarding conflict management. They conclude that training in managing the mental health of patients has a positive impact on staff but that their needs to be an organisational level response to aggression prevention and management.

Bakker et al (2022) identify how providing training in communication to prevent and manage conflict within the pre-registration nursing curriculum has a positive impact on how students rated their communication skills and ability to manage conflict. They do not however demonstrate if there is an impact on their ability to deal with conflict in the care setting. These findings are supported by a systematic review of the literature by Price et al (2018) which suggested that training in conflict and de-escalation techniques among mental health professionals does impact on their knowledge and confidence, but that the evidence for its impact on their ability to manage episodes of conflict remains poor. Such studies underline the view that conflict management skills can be taught and that the learning not only potentially helps with the management of conflict, but that it actually alters how staff feel about managing conflict in the workplace.

It appears that equipping staff with the knowledge and confidence to act in situations involving conflict which is most important as knowledge and confidence will serve to help protect the wellbeing of staff members and in turn aid with issues like protecting physical and mental wellbeing, the avoidance of burnout and ultimately staff retention.

Support

Sometimes all a person needs after experiencing conflict is someone to listen. This may mean the

manager taking some time just to hear what the staff member has to say about the incident and the impact it has had on them. Other staff may want to talk to colleagues they work with or those they particularly trust as opposed to their manager. The manager should not consider this as a failure on their part, but rather understand that each individual will respond to conflict in their own way (Ellis, 2022b).

As with all forms of support that managers need to engage with, supporting people who have experienced conflict in the workplace can be time consuming and requires the exercise of emotional intelligence and empathy (Salovey and Mayer, 1989).

Supervision

As a tool of staff development, support and retention, supervision is often overlooked by the busy manager. Hawkins and McMahon (2020) identify how making the time and space to reflect on situations which are troubling the supervisee is one of the main reasons for undertaking supervision. Not only this, but supervision, undertaken willingly and skilfully can enable the supervisee to take some learning from a situation which might otherwise be challenging for them. Hawkins and McMahon (2020) suggest that in this context, supervision might enable the supervisee to thrive and develop from a situation which might otherwise have impacted their ability to undertake their role.

Martin and Snowdon (2020) support the view that supervision has an important role to play in supporting staff through challenging times. This relates strongly to the nature of supervision, which is about identifying the concerns and needs the supervisee and working through these to equip them with the knowledge, understanding and skills they require to address whatever challenges are facing them. In this respect supervision is useful in developing feeling of support, personal and professional development as well as in reducing stress and feeling of inadequacy.

In teams where supervision is established and widely practiced, it can prove to be a particularly important and useful tool. When there has been an episode of conflict that has affected the wider team, then group supervision, facilitated by the manager or a third-party manager can be particularly helpful in resetting the team. Group supervision allows

the supervisees to explore an issue from multiple perspectives, which allows less experienced staff to learn ways of coping and managing from more experienced team members. In group supervision there is the opportunity to grow a sense of unity within a team that helps staff members who may have started to feel isolated as a result of a particular incident. The team will gain more from group supervision where it is undertaken with the wider multidisciplinary team (Dilworth et al, 2013), which increases the sense of wider belonging and togetherness.

Observe

One of the key things the manager can do after a particular incident in the workplace is to become attuned to any changes in the behaviour of the staff members affected. Behavioural changes are good indicators that someone is not coping even if they are not asking for help or turning down offers of help and support. The Health and Safety Executive (ND) suggest some of the signs and symptoms that someone is not coping might include:

- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Sick leave
- ▶ Being hyper vigilant.

Notably the need for support might arise some time after a particular event, so the need for the manager to be vigilant is an ongoing issue — including the period of time following the provision of support and supervision.

CONCLUSION

Here we have identified that conflict in the workplace can give rise to issues which affect all aspects of wellbeing among health and social care professionals. We have seen that by providing training, there is an opportunity for managers to help support and develop staff such that they feel better equipped to manage conflict in the workplace. We have seen how supervision can be used for personal and professional development, in which the supervisor supports and enables development for the supervisee in areas that they have identified themselves as lacking. Supervision following an incident can be beneficial in growing the wellbeing of the staff involved and following

an event that has affected the wider staff group, group supervision can help build a sense of belonging and unity.

We have identified how the manager needs to observe staff members for signs and symptoms that they are not coping for some time after an incident of conflict, as some times the effects may take a while to manifest themselves in some staff. **WUK**

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