Managing and Mitigating Conflict: Tips and Tools for Nurses

Purpose:

This Tips and Tools guide, is designed to help you better understand how to prevent and manage conflict in your work environment. The information is based on the **RNAO Healthy Work Environment, Best Practice Guideline:** *Preventing and Mitigating Conflict in Health-Care Teams.*

Why is this important?

This topic is important to nurses. Research shows that in the general population and among health-care providers, the occurrence of burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion, can be attributed to negative interactions and interpersonal conflict (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2008; Taris, et al., 2005). This affects the work we do with our colleagues and patients. Therefore, it is important that organizations and individuals address the management of interpersonal conflict through a guided process, which includes education and accountability to change the workplace dynamic and prevent potential negative outcomes.

"Change the way you think about disagreements, and how you behave during conflict. Be willing to listen, engage directly, constructively, and collaboratively with your colleagues."

(Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011)

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Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario
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Facts:

Conflict:

- Is a phenomenon occurring between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goal (Barki & Hartwick, 2001).

- Can create a stressful work environment with negative consequences such as: job dissatisfaction, weak organizational commitment, lack of involvement, low morale, poor working relationships, a diminished sense of well-being, emotional exhaustion, a lack of trust, absenteeism, burnout and turnover.

- Is inevitable in the work setting due to inherent differences in goals, needs, desires, responsibilities, perceptions and ideas.

- Always has a meaning and/or contributing underlying cause.

What causes conflict?

- Perceived and actual differences that may contribute to conflict include, but are not limited to; professional identity; cultural identity; gender; gender identity; nationality; race or ethnic origin; colour; religion; age; sexual orientation; marital status; educational background; disability; work values; goals and interest.

- Negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of personal or group's goals (Barki & Hartwick, 2004).

Concepts related to conflict:

- **Bullying:** Accumulation of repeated acts by one or more individuals with an intention to harm.

- **Workplace incivility:** Behaviour that violates respectful workplace norms.

- **Horizontal violence:** Bullying and aggression involving an inter-group conflict.

- **Ostracism:** Informal exclusion from a group through social rejection.

How can conflict be prevented, mitigated and managed in health-care settings:

- Leadership is required across all organizational and health-care sector levels to create environments that manage and mitigate conflict.

- Understanding that managing and preventing conflict may result in positive outcomes such as new ideas and initiatives.

- Understanding the need to address situations of conflict based on discriminatory practices through legal consultation supported by the Canadian Human Rights Act.

Tips for managing conflict at work:

- Identify the issue(s). What is the real problem? Is your perception of the problem different than the other person?

- Allow the other person to express their concern.

- Acknowledge if you are at fault and reframe emotions.

- Apologize for your part in the conflict. You are not accepting the entire blame; you are taking responsibility for your contribution to the situation.
- Use open, honest and transparent communication.
- Provide constructive and supportive feedback.
- Handle conflict sooner rather than later.
- Invite the other person to talk about the situation. Best in an undisturbed location with time to address the issue. Don't interrupt. Let the other person talk.

Tips for managing conflict as a team:

- Foster open communication related to the provision of patient care and other work related activities.
- Indentify and agree on processes for conflict resolution and problem-solving.
- Utilize a decision-making process that is open and transparent.
- Encourage active engagement of members within an environment of respect and professionalism.

Tips for self-care related to conflict:

- Seek support.
- Obtain information.
- Provide support to others.
- Listen, ask questions, and make a commitment to resolve the conflict.
- Choose to listen and learn – both to your own internal voice and to the voice of your colleague.
- Explore options to deal with conflict, separate problems from people, exploring the reasons for your own reactions when in conflict.
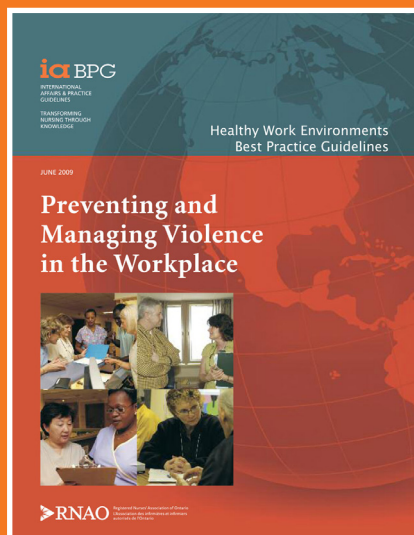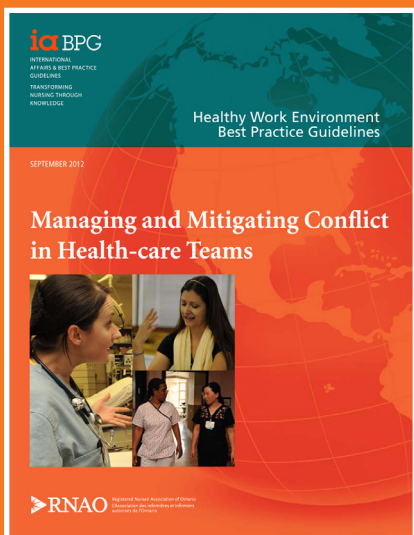
Conflict Resolution Strategies
De-escalation:

There are a number of conflict resolution strategies that can be useful when in a potentially or full blown conflict situation. Many of these strategies can be found in the BPG. De-escalation is one of the most important conflict resolution strategies.

When you are in a situation where someone is becoming agitated, loud or hostile, use a strategy that seeks to calm the person and help them feel respected and heard. Specific de-escalation behaviours include:

- Assume a calm, firm stance – stand or sit tall, shoulders back, hands quiet, and give the person your full attention.
- Speak in a clear voice but calmly and at normal volume.
- Acknowledge feelings and paraphrase what the person is saying: "I can see that you are very upset about what just happened."
- Do not interrupt or try to problem-solve until the person has calmed down. Just listen and reflect on what you hear them saying.
- Take care not to sound patronizing or sarcastic. The person should feel that you are genuinely listening to her/his perception of the situation.
- Once they are calmer, ask what they want to have happen and how they might go about seeking a solution.

Link to the full version of these guidelines

Managing and mitigating Conflict in Health-care Teams BPG
www.RNAO.ca/bpg/conflictmanagement

Preventing and Managing Violence in the Workplace BPG
www.RNAO.ca/bpg/workplace_violence

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