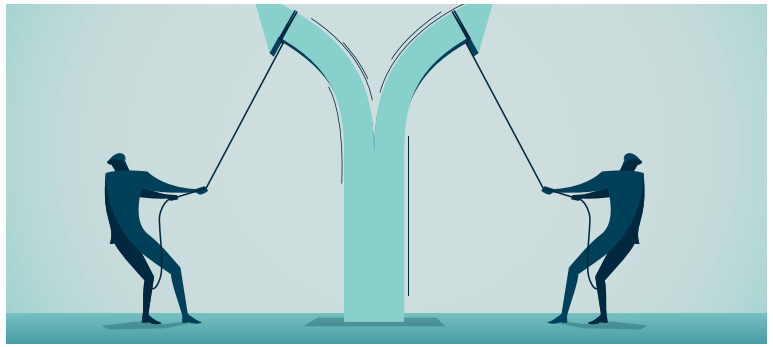


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LCP Dental Team Coaching (formerly Julie Weir & Associates) is recognized as the premier consulting firm specializing in pediatric dentistry since 1996.

## Navigate Conflict and Cultivate Crystal Clear Communication Now

The quickest way to stifle a positive culture in a practice is to avoid or mismanage conflict within the team or with parents. Leaders are challenged to quickly turn conflict into an opportunity to create a stronger connection with their team, improve their office culture, and elevate the customer experience.

Conflict is beneficial because it signals that something needs to change for both parties involved. Unfortunately, in most confrontations, both parties look to defend their position instead of seeing the conflict as an opportunity to make positive change, together.

According to the Workplace Conflict Statistics, updated for 2023, "85 percent of employees experience some conflict in the workplace." As leaders, we must prepare our team for confrontations with the parents of patients and fellow team members so they have the skills to de-escalate and engage in productive conflict.

Simple ways leaders should teach team members to engage when confronted with conflict.

### 1. Stay Calm and Listen:

- When dealing with an upset parent or team member, the most important step is to stay calm and composed.
- Avoid reacting defensively or emotionally, as this will aggravate the situation. Listen carefully to their concerns and make them feel heard and understood.
- Ensure they have explained their complete concern before providing a solution.

### 2. Communicate Clearly and Honestly:

- Once they have voiced their concerns, communicate clearly and honestly about the matter at hand with a smile.
- Explain the situation clearly and explain any misunderstood concepts.
- Be ready to offer alternative options when applicable and be open to further discussion.

### 3. Empathize with the Patient and the Parent:

- Understand that parents are concerned for their children and their oral health.
- Empathizing with them and finding ways to make them comfortable will go a long way in managing any potential conflict.
- Explain the care plan in a way that makes them feel heard and their anxieties understood.
- Slowing down and offering a warm, personal approach builds rapport and trust with the families.

### 4. Learn from Each Experience:

- View every conflict resolution as a learning experience.
- Analyze the situation and consider what could be done differently in the future.
- After the problem has been resolved, offer a gesture of appreciation for their time and understanding. This could be a note, gift card, or a special prize for a child.

The source of conflict rarely appears on the surface. Great leaders understand this, so they see conflict as an opportunity to connect at a deeper level and better understand the person they lead and the people they serve. Instead of reacting emotionally, leaders ask questions empathetically. It is important to note that listening and validating a parent or team member's concern does not mean the leader is obligated to follow their directions or give them what they want. The leader's mission is to validate the concerns of the parent or team member, so they feel understood.

Due to personal temperament or traumatic experiences, conflict-avoidant leaders often miss out on the opportunity to lead through conflict because they do not understand why humans act out in confrontation. Their outburst, frustration, or even foul language is an attempt to signal to others that one of their six core human needs is not being met, and they are illustrating that point with a fluorescent verbal highlighter.

Understanding which needs the parent or team member is trying to meet can help a leader tailor their language to speak directly to that need and achieve a positive outcome when conflict arises.

So, what are these six needs?

### **NEED #1: THE NEED FOR CERTAINTY, STABILITY, AND PREDICTABILITY**

Parents or coworkers prioritizing certainty will react poorly to being surprised by anything. This can be seen in parents arguing about insurance benefits, unanticipated cost of care, or an employee not wanting to change workdays or processes. When people react unfavorably, it creates an uncomfortable confrontation. Unmet expectations need to be acknowledged. Suggested verbiage would be, "I understand why you are confused or frustrated. I would be, too, if I were expecting this procedure to be fully covered under my insurance benefits. I would love to walk you through the benefits your insurance does provide so there are not any surprises in the future."

### **NEED #2: THE NEED FOR UNCERTAINTY, VARIETY, AND EXCITEMENT**

Some team members like to try new things, change how things are done, and grow, while their teammates have a high need for certainty and predictability. Conflict is nothing more than a clash of meeting different needs. Understand-

ing team member's need makes them feel validated. Someone on a team may need a place to utilize their creativity, so instead of them creating an SOP (Standard Operating Procedure), they could contribute to the practice's social media, or plan theme days.

### **NEED #3: THE NEED TO FEEL VALUED AND IMPORTANT**

The person who values feeling significant will want to be noticed. Just like a child who throws a tantrum to be seen, adults will engage in the same behavior to get the attention of the person they believe can meet their needs. Sometimes, this behavior is expressed as conflict. The worst thing a person can do is brush off the parent or team member's concern as unimportant or not a big deal. Instead, genuinely acknowledge their concerns and give them the floor to share their thoughts. People often want to feel heard, understood and valued more than they want something fixed. Thank them for sharing their perspective and insight, then ask them if they need anything or simply want to share their concern.

### **NEED #4: THE NEED FOR CONNECTION AND LOVE**

To feel connected, team members will seek approval and gestures or acknowledgment from their leaders and team. Conflict can arise when they feel like they are just a cog in the office wheel and are not fulfilling a meaningful role. Simply taking the time to create meaningful connections with each team member and show them how their contribution helps the team reach the practice mission and vision, will have a lasting impact.

### **NEED #5: THE NEED TO DEVELOP AND IMPROVE**

Those with a core need for growth will always strive to improve and learn more. They are very good at their jobs but tend to move on when they believe they've reached their full potential. Conflict can arise when others are less interested in growth and improvement than they are. Ask them to share what they are learning and how it is improving their life. Involve them in special committees and leadership team initiatives that interest them.

### **NEED #6: THE NEED TO GIVE AND POSITIVELY IMPACT THE WORLD**

The need to feel a sense of contribution can drive a team member to give their heart and soul to the practice if they think it is making a difference. However, if a conflict arises

because they are not upholding the rules or they are taking too long with a patient, instead of focusing on what they are doing incorrectly, seek to help them understand that by taking too long with one child, another child is missing out on the fantastic care they will receive from a timely appointment. Show them how following the protocol makes a difference and has meaning.

Recognizing a person's core human needs and responding accordingly takes practice; however, it will elevate the culture and patient experience. Leaders embrace every opportunity to grow through conflict. When they stop avoiding conflict and invest in better understanding their patients, parents, and team, it will provide a lasting return.

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't being said. The art of reading between the lines is a lifelong quest of the wise.”

Shannon L. Alder

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