

CONFLICT

Scaredy-cat. Chicken. Big baby. What are you so afraid of? Why are you always trying to avoid *it*? Why do you steer clear of, evade, and avoid *it* like the plague? Why does *it* make you tremble in your scrubs?

What's the *it*? The *it* is conflict.

What you don't seem able to accept is when you deal with human beings, staff, patients or peers, conflicts occur. Conflicts are inescapable, unavoidable. If you have staff, you'll have conflicts. If you have patients, you'll have conflicts. If you have competition, you'll have conflicts. If you have politics, bureaucracy, different camps of thought, you'll have conflicts. Conflicts happen!

Since conflicts invariably happen, don't you think you should get effective at managing them? The problem is, when your relationship to conflicts is terror, you can't get a handle on them.

Why are you so terrified of conflicts? Why, because conflict is a chaotic event. As a dentist, you hate things that can't be well controlled and ordered. Conflict is filled with tension. As a dentist, you like things smooth and uneventful. Conflict is unpredictable. You love predictability. Conflict is disruptive. You hate disruption. Conflict is filled with emotion. You have a real hard time handling emotions. Is it any wonder you avoid conflicts? For you, conflict is tantamount to sticking your hand in a fire.

What you fail to appreciate is conflicts are a powerful access to the future. Conflicts are an opening, not an impasse. The tremendous energy generated in a conflict can be redirected toward creating better staff relations, more effective action and greater results. Conflicts are an opportunity waiting to happen rather than a problem to be avoided.

One of your primary responsibilities as a manager is to make sure conflicts are on the table, not around the table, and certainly not under the table. Your job is to move conflicts from being between people to being about the issues that people have.

But how do you make conflict about the issue, not each other? When people are in the heat of a conflict, they automatically go for being right and making the other wrong. When a person is made wrong, they react by making the other wrong. Punch, counter-punch. And the original issue that incited the conflict has disappeared and now it's all

about being right and making the other wrong. This is a dead-end. You're stuck here. Get out of here as fast as you can.

Don't address who is right. Don't try to smooth things out. Don't try to make peace. Don't have each person involved listen to the other, repeat what each has said, and try to understand the other's point of view. Just a huge waste of time. Determine the commitment in the background that is causing the conflict in the foreground.

Rather than doing peace-making, calming people down, making each play nice, ask each party, "What are you committed to?" When you examine any conflict, behind every conflict, there are always conflicting commitments. A hygienist wants an assistant to clean the room so she can stay on time, while you want to keep staff expenses below 25%. A front desk wants the back to help out when she's busy so she has time to confirm patients while the back wants more time to get their ordering and sterilization done. People clash because they are committed.

Commitments are always about generating a future. Find out what future each party is committed to achieving. Once the commitments are articulated and the future spoken, now real negotiation is possible. Ask each party what they can do to assist the other in making the other person's future happen. Now they are working on the issue not each other.

If you weren't afraid of conflict, how would you be different as a leader, as a manager and as an owner? My bet is you'd be plenty different. You'd confront problems, make direct and powerful requests and stop hiding in your private office hoping the office manager handles it.

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Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict.

Dorothy Thompson