

# Dealing with Staff Squabbles

Here are some doable measures for resolving conflicts.

BY LYNN HOMISAK, PRT

**To Our Readers:** *There are no foolish questions. Chances are that if you have a question or concern in your practice, others are experiencing a similar situation. We're here to help. PM [doctor and staff] readers are encouraged to submit questions to [lynn@soshms.com](mailto:lynn@soshms.com) which will be printed and answered in this column anonymously.*

## Topic: Staff Squabbles

Dear Lynn,

*I've been in practice for 24 years, during which I have hired my share of employees. In my dual role as physician AND acting manager of my practice, I have had to deal with staff who have not gotten along with each other. I just don't have the time or patience for such drama, and to be*

*honest, it is the most stressful part of my day. How do other doctors manage this problem and stay sane?*

You are right to ask. Infighting is not restricted to your office. It is a common occurrence. In most cases, sensible adults find ways to work disagreements out themselves. However, too often, where tensions appear to escalate from “disagreement” to “apocalyptic” it calls for an intervention. Since you wear both the doctor and the management shoes in your practice, it does fall on you to take the necessary steps to intercede—all the while remembering that you are their boss, not their parent.

Unfortunately, conflict management resolution is not a required course in medical school, although it should be. Doctors who become employers are just as likely to deal with personalities and behavioral issues as they are ailments of the feet! When all interactions work as they should, everyone can manage their assigned duties without squabbles. When relationships fail, even little conflicts become a distraction; not only creating a hostile work environment, but a reduction in productivity and efficiency. And guess what?

Patients sense it as well. So, regardless of how conflicts start, they must end. And more to your question... how?

First off, here are some things you should avoid doing:

- 1) Ignore them and hope they just go away,
- 2) Dismiss or diminish their concerns (right or wrong) as ridiculous, or
- 3) Take sides or assign blame before knowing all the details.

Now, for some doable measures.

1) Identify the issues. Some offices find that utilizing a “Grievance” survey helps to frame the facts vs. emotions and uncover the root cause of the problem. This type of survey can outline what happened. Why? When? How often? Who is involved? By doing this, staff can air their troubles in writing, understanding that a conversation to examine the circumstances will follow. (Email [lynn@soshms.com](mailto:lynn@soshms.com) for a complimentary copy.)

2) If you find that recurrent tiffs involve personality clashes (jealousy, negativity, know it

*Continued on page 44*

*Staff Squabbles (from page 43)*

all, etc.), it requires a necessary verbal reminder. Regardless of disagreements with co-workers, doing what is necessary to maintain a professional, cooperative team is as much a part of their job as expected work assignments and outcomes. No one says staff must be best friends; however, they ARE expected to treat one another with

---

---

## Create a safe zone where staff are encouraged to have a civil discussion.

---

---

respect and focus on things they have in common instead of their differences.

3) Staff are sometimes at odds over how to best carry out work duties, or a perceived disproportionate workload (one not pulling their weight). The underlying problem may be lack of direction or vague job descriptions—make these clear! Inconsistent training or the absence of observational management (aka—management by walking around) also contributes to misunderstanding.

4) You are not expected to come up with all the answers. Instead, create a safe zone where they are encouraged to have a civil discussion. Convey to them your confidence in their ability to work things out. Suggest that they listen to the complaint(s) and how they would feel if the roles were reversed. In other words, what could they learn by wearing the other's shoes? (This is a proven eye-opening activity in helping front and back office staff have a better appreciation for each other's roles.) Then ask, "In light of this information, what one thing can you each commit to doing to help improve this situation?" Often, if they are able to identify a resolution on their own, they are more likely to see it through.

5) Hold them to their commitments. Speaking privately with staff should always include follow-up by way of a timeline to measure progress ("Let's meet again in two weeks and determine how things are going."), documentation of the event in their employment record (better thought of as a coaching/learning moment), and an expected consequence for repeated acts of office turmoil.

Of course, avoiding conflicts before they occur is the prize. Oh, for a crystal ball! That would solve everything! And yet, a conflict-free environment is not entirely impossible. It starts with the hiring process. After interviewing potential employees, introduce the selected candidate to your existing team before hiring. Invite the prospective new employee to lunch with your staff—allow them to socialize, then share first impressions. Listen to your staff's thoughts. Hardly a guarantee, yet a unanimous vote of acceptance and approval is a great start!

## Topic: Time Wasters Waste Time

*Dear Lynn,*

*In an effort to make things more efficient in our practice, we seem to be running in circles and accomplishing less and less. What are we doing wrong?*

First, my husband's youthful story. After getting his driver's license at age 14 (South Dakota), he borrowed his mother's car to, of course, impress friends. Upon returning home, the car would not start. All his buddies offered a fix: out of gas, dead battery, plugged fuel line, choke (1968), etc. After sheepishly calling home to ex-



plain the trouble to his mom, she asked, "is the shifter in park?" That story is not to suggest you are an inexperienced teenager; rather, that the obvious fix is often the right one. (My appliance isn't working. Is it plugged in?)

Instead of focusing on doing things in a circular motion, you might take a look at some of the undetected time waster activities that actually get in the way of meeting efficiency objectives. For example:

1) Thinking perfectionism rather than excellence. Look up the definition of perfect in the dictionary: entirely without flaws, defects, or shortcomings; accurate, exact, or correct in every detail. Unrealistic. Excellence, on the other hand, is the quality of being outstanding or extremely good. Break the addiction of chasing a dream of the "perfect practice" and focus instead on what is actually achievable. Thinking too big might be holding you back. You will be much more productive, and waste less time, by making continual small changes to increase efficiency. It's best to strive for an "excellent practice" and leave the whim of perfection in the world of fantasy where it belongs.

2) DIY. If you think you are saving time by using the "I'd rather do it myself" approach, you have also probably noticed it can lead to stress, even burnout. Continue this exhausting pace over time and the work you once enjoyed will suddenly start feeling like WORK. Eventually, you will make less effort and accept less than acceptable results.

*Continued on page 46*

*Staff Squabbles (from page 44)*

Delegate. Delegation is a time management strategy that involves letting go of tasks others prove they can handle. It is not shifting work because you don't want to do it or because it is difficult or boring. Delegation re-

however, it is essential that you keep it in check. Over-socialization can sabotage areas necessary to keep your day on track. And some tasks you avoid in real time, like charting, for example, will eventually have to be addressed.

4) Decision Impossible. Decision-making is not always easy, can-

remain static. Worse yet, no decision allows employees to decide how to proceed for themselves—setting the stage for inconsistency, potential calamity, and a management nightmare.

Are there any time-wasted minutes in your practice that can be replaced with more productive ones? The clock is ticking. Don't delay. **PM**

---

---

## Over-socialization can sabotage areas necessary to keep your day on track.

---

moves tasks from your plate while maintaining patient flow and simultaneous streams of revenue. Delegation is productive AND profitable!

3) "Social" Security. The social aspect of our work (spending downtime chatting it up with patients, staff, co-workers, vendors, etc.) is a very real component of job and patient satisfaction. For that reason, you don't need to eliminate it from your day completely;

not always be done on the spot, and often takes an emotional toll. You could delay a decision with a "let me think about it". However, sooner than later, TAKE A POSITION! It helps keep everyone on the same path, one direction, moving forward. You can always re-evaluate if needed. When looked upon for answers, your indecisiveness creates confusion, and important issues that need attention



**Ms. Lynn Homisak**, President of SOS Healthcare Management Solutions, carries a Certificate in Human Resource Studies from Cornell University School of Industry and Labor Relations. She is the 2010 recipient of

*Podiatry Management's* Lifetime Achievement Award and was inducted into the *PM* Hall of Fame. She is also an Editorial Advisor for *Podiatry Management Magazine* and is recognized nationwide as a speaker, writer, and expert in staff and human resource management.

---