


Navigating internal conflict through change and innovation in healthcare





In the changeable healthcare landscape, change and innovation have taken centre stage, particularly in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. This period has led to a rapid shift towards digital solutions and alternative care models, fundamentally transforming healthcare delivery. As scientific and technological advancements continue to reshape practices, the complexities of managing change will become increasingly important and challenging.

Effective conflict management is crucial to success in healthcare change and innovation. Conflicts can range from minor misunderstandings to significant difference of opinion, which typically stem from a mix of divergent needs, values, and interests, even when working towards a shared goal.

Through our work, we have found there are generally three main areas of conflict in healthcare organisations. Understanding the types of conflict and identifying the root causes are the first steps an organisation can take to constructively manage conflict and achieve positive outcomes.

What are the types of conflict in healthcare?

Conflict can generally be categorised into three main areas:

1 Task conflict

Disagreements arising over specific tasks' content, goals, or methods. For instance, team members may differ on treatment protocols or patient care strategies.

2 Relationship conflict

Tensions between team members often stem from personal incompatibilities. Such conflicts can disrupt teamwork and affect overall morale.

3 Process conflict

Differing opinions on how to accomplish work, including issues related to procedures, timelines, and resource allocation. This form of conflict is particularly complex due to the interplay of interpersonal dynamics and power relations, ever-present in high-stress environments.

While conflicts can have negative repercussions - such as decreased motivation, heightened stress levels, and diminished productivity - they can also serve as catalysts for creativity, challenge entrenched assumptions, and enhance decision-making when approached constructively.

What are the roots of conflict?

In healthcare, organisational conflict can arise from various root causes reflecting the sector's complexities. These causes may include hierarchical structures, specialised roles, cultural differences, and workload pressures. The intricacies of high-stress environments, combined with the diverse functions of various departments or agencies, can further add to the complexity of these dynamics.

We have found the root causes of organisational conflict in healthcare to include:

Matter	Impact
 <p>Divergent goals and priorities</p>	<p>Different departments or professionals may prioritise competing objectives, such as patient care versus cost containment, leading to conflicts in decision-making.</p>
 <p>Hierarchical structures</p>	<p>Rigid hierarchies can create power imbalances, where lower-level staff may feel undervalued or unheard, leading to resentment and conflicts.</p>
 <p>Communication breakdowns</p>	<p>Ineffective communication can lead to misunderstandings, misinformation, and a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities.</p>
 <p>Cultural differences</p>	<p>Diverse backgrounds and perspectives among staff can result in differing values and approaches to care, potentially causing friction.</p>
 <p>Resource allocation</p>	<p>Competition for limited resources—such as funding, staffing, or equipment—can lead to conflicts over priorities and perceived inequities.</p>
 <p>Workload pressures</p>	<p>High-stress environments and overwhelming workloads can exacerbate tensions, leading to burnout and conflict among staff.</p>
 <p>Change resistance</p>	<p>Policies, procedures, or technology changes can lead to staff resistance, especially if they feel unprepared or inadequately supported.</p>
 <p>Role ambiguity</p>	<p>Unclear job descriptions or overlapping responsibilities can create confusion and conflict over who is accountable for specific tasks.</p>
 <p>Interpersonal relationships</p>	<p>Personal incompatibilities or past grievances among team members can negatively affect collaboration and lead to ongoing conflicts.</p>
 <p>Leadership styles</p>	<p>Different management approaches can create friction, particularly if leadership is perceived as authoritarian or unresponsive to staff concerns.</p>

Addressing these root causes requires proactive communication, effective leadership, and a commitment to fostering a collaborative organisational culture.

Managing difficult stakeholders

Here are three effective strategies to help manage stakeholder conflict which we have found to be highly effective in healthcare environments. Remember, navigating conflicting perspectives requires a commitment to fostering a collaborative environment.

1 Create a conducive environment for difficult conversations

- ▶ Designate appropriate spaces: Ensure discussions occur in suitable physical settings and with sufficient time to promote focus and respect.
- ▶ Practice active listening: Be fully present during conversations, paying attention to non-verbal cues and asking open-ended questions. Aim to understand rather than simply respond.
- ▶ Cultivate curiosity: Stay open to new ideas and innovative approaches, fostering a culture of exploration.
- ▶ Share a common purpose: Clearly articulate a shared vision and objectives, highlighting their importance and alignment with organisational goals. Genuinely listen to others' views and opinions.
- ▶ Explore and problem-solve together: Break down problems respectfully into manageable parts, collaboratively discuss potential solutions, and weigh their pros and cons.

2 Develop essential skills

Effective conflict resolution, problem-solving, and active listening are critical for navigating diverse perspectives. Encouraging team members to refine these abilities can significantly enhance collaboration. Ongoing learning and practice support refining and improving skills.

3 Commit to the process

A steadfast commitment to conflict resolution fosters a shared language and understanding within teams, paving the way for more effective collaboration and ultimately leading to better patient outcomes.

Organisational conflict in healthcare organisations is not easy to solve. Often, matters are within the broader environment and outside of the organisation's responsibility or control. The above strategies can help navigate situations with respect and consideration of all stakeholder needs.

Tailored solutions for healthcare organisations

At Phillips Group, we offer customised programs to equip healthcare organisations with the skills to navigate conflict and embrace change effectively. Our offerings include:

- ▶ Effective communication techniques: Workshops that enhance communication skills for better collaboration.
- ▶ Change management and communication programs: Strategies to support teams in managing change effectively while maintaining a cohesive working environment.

By prioritising these areas, healthcare organisations can better navigate the complexities of change and innovation, ensuring they continue to provide high-quality care in an ever-evolving landscape.

If you have gaps in your communication and engagement approaches, we can provide support.



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