

Building Bridges: Approaches to Conflict Resolution That Lead to a Collaborative Learning Environment

Kheyandra D. Lewis , MD, MEd
Scott A. Holliday , MD

Karen J. Nichols , DO, MA (@karenjnichols)
Kyla P. Terhune , MD, MBA (@kylaterhune)

The Challenge

The roles of designated institutional official, program director, and faculty often involve situations where conflict must be resolved. Daily, issues arise in which key partners feel that their needs are unaddressed, often surfacing as conflicts to be managed by the leader in place. In graduate medical education (GME), common examples include communication breakdowns exacerbated by busy schedules and high stress leading to unmet expectations; inherent power imbalances, such as those between faculty and trainees¹; and interpersonal disputes due to differing perspectives and competing priorities. GME leaders must learn to recognize and proactively address conflict to promote a supportive and collaborative training environment. Easier said than done!

What Is Known

Conflict is inevitable, often emerging when we least expect it. It can manifest in many forms, making it difficult to pinpoint the nature of a disagreement or its resulting impact. We may try to avoid conflict by employing ineffective strategies, such as hoping the problem will resolve on its own or taking a hierarchical approach without exploring alternatives. In GME, these strategies often fail to address the real issue and can lead to strained relationships, team silos, poor work quality, or project delays. Instead, one must adopt a proactive approach to utilize conflict as an opportunity to foster connections, strengthen communication, and gain understanding.² It is important to acknowledge that mistakes are a natural part of the process and offer valuable opportunities for growth and continued learning. Consider using a systematic approach, beginning with identifying the sources of conflict through decision-making and communicating outcomes while maintaining a respectful, professional demeanor throughout.

How You Can Start TODAY

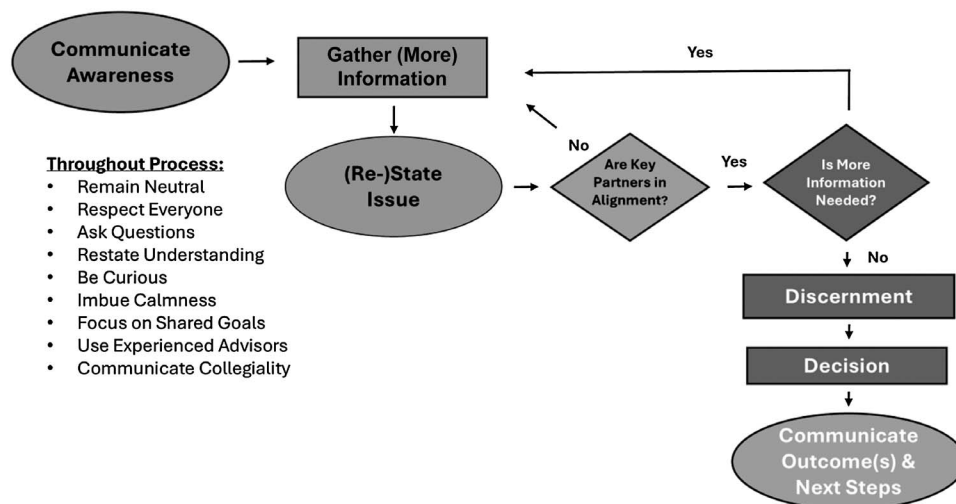
1. **Identify the real problem.** Identify the root cause of the issue: task (the what), process (the how), status (who has authority), or relationship (who is valued).^{1,2} Invest the time to get the facts. When asking questions, maintain the frame of seeking clarity and understanding. Ask, for example, “Can you tell me more?” or “Can you help me to understand?”^{3,4} Seek to clarify the

RIP OUT ACTION ITEMS

1. Prepare to address a conflict by managing your attitude—stay calm and composed before reacting.
2. Approach the situation with curiosity and clarity, gathering information while keeping in mind that your perspective is just one of many.
3. Focus on areas of agreement. Avoid placing blame, and give others the opportunity to maintain their dignity during the process.

definitions of terms, as their meanings may vary from person to person. Once you have clarity, ensure that you repeat the heard problem and then ask for affirmation that you have an accurate understanding. Actively listen to what is said and pay attention to what is not said. When there is misalignment of actions and intent, separate the behavior from the meaning.

2. **Take on the issue early and visibly.** Do not delay addressing conflict. To promote productive conversations, establish the optimal conditions, timing, and transparency.
3. **Communicate clearly and calmly.** Set expectations to ensure that all key partners are aware of important goals and deliverables and have an opportunity to provide information. Provide framing that values the individual and incorporates best intentions.
4. **View conflict as a negotiation.** Reframing conflict moves discussions forward productively. Instead of focusing on problems and assigning blame, shift to identifying solutions. Acknowledge where you can and cannot yield while obtaining information and reframing as needed. Empowering and including key partners to think creatively can encourage innovation.
5. **Lower the temperature.** Be mindful to calibrate your emotions and allow space between the disagreement and your reaction. Determine the most thoughtful way to respond, rather than reacting impulsively.² If you’re facing a conflict, before reacting, count to 10, or count to 100. Discomfort in challenging conversations is temporary—stay positive! Refrain from assigning a feeling to someone else. Don’t say, “I bet you must feel...” Rather, remain curious: “Tell me how that makes you feel.”
6. **Respect others.** Remember people are human, and disagreements are normal. Stay open to different perspectives and identify your own biases and assumptions.^{2,3} Ask yourself: (1) Are past experiences influencing how you interpret current events? (2) Are you making



negative assumptions about the other person's intention? Foster connections and build reciprocity. Try to identify ways for all parties to feel valued in the discussion and engaged in creating the ultimate outcome.

What You Can Do LONG TERM

1. **Reflect without ruminating.** Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of your approach and conflict management strategies. Examine your own story of the problem. Verify and dig deeper for the facts. While it is important to identify patterns or barriers to successfully navigate conflicts, do not dwell on past mistakes. Take time to celebrate your successes. Reflect on the strategies that have been effective in navigating conflict and consider what you were focusing on that worked well, as well as what you may have overlooked that could have improved the outcome.
2. **Enlist a trusted source.** A valued colleague can provide perspective or even help you practice scripts for a response while mainlining discretion. Spend time to build and nurture a network of peers and senior experienced colleagues who can provide resources and lend support. For escalating or ongoing conflicts, it may be useful to seek the expertise of an executive coach who can offer advice and strategies external to your personal network.
3. **Embrace conflict as an opportunity to innovate.** Utilize conflicts as an avenue to explore new ideas and encourage differing perspectives. When each voice and opinion is valued, innovative solutions unfold.
4. **Do the right thing.** Lead by example, demonstrate to others how to handle conflict constructively. Frame solutions in a way that empowers others to take actions they know are necessary.
5. **Recover from conflict effectively.** Resiliency allows us to use missteps as opportunities to rebound for continued growth and learning. It is important to find the

lesson(s) learned from the conflict itself or the outcome and use them to further develop skills for the next time.

6. **Continue to learn and obtain feedback.** Obtain feedback from various sources. Consider observers (micro-mentors) who can offer external perspective and perceptions. Continue to develop and refine your skills, participate in leadership training, and engage with resources (eg, books, podcasts).

References and Resources for Further Reading

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Kheyandra D. Lewis, MD, MEd, is Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA; **Scott A. Holliday, MD**, is Designated Institutional Official (DIO), Associate Dean for Graduate Medical Education (GME), and Associate Professor of Internal Medicine and Pediatrics, The Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus, Ohio, USA; **Karen J. Nichols, DO, MA**, is Past Chair, Board of Directors, Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, Chicago, Illinois, USA, and Professor of Internal Medicine, and Dean, Midwestern University/Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine, Chicago, Illinois, USA (retired); and **Kyla P. Terhune, MD, MBA**, is DIO, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and Professor of Surgery, Vanderbilt School of Medicine, Nashville, Tennessee, USA.

Corresponding author: Kheyandra D. Lewis, MD, MEd, Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, kdl62@drexel.edu