

Resolving Differences between Health Service Integration Initiative Partners

Description:

This tool provides an overview of the sources of conflict, describes five modes of conflict resolution, and offers steps to follow to resolve differences.

How it can be used:

Conflict in project management is inevitable. By its nature, the potential for differences in a health service integration initiative can be high because it involves individuals from different backgrounds and orientations working together to find a new way of working together. Use this tool to help understand how to manage differences and find resolutions.

The cause of differences in health service integration initiatives can be based on differences in values, attitudes, needs, expectations, perceptions, resources, and personalities. Skills to deal with conflict can assist in handling and effectively resolving conflicts and lead to a more productive initiative.

However, conflict can be constructive and healthy for an initiative. Conflict can bring to light underlying issues. They can force people to confront possible defects in a solution and choose a better one. Constructive conflict occurs when people change and grow personally from the disagreement, when cohesiveness is formed among partners, and a solution to the issue is found.

However, if conflict is not managed properly, it can be detrimental to your health service integration initiative by threatening organizational unity, partnerships, relationships, and interpersonal connections. Destructive conflict occurs when a decision has not been made and the problem remains, energy is taken away from more important activities or issues, the morale of teams or individuals is destroyed, and groups of people or teams are polarized.

It is important to understand the dynamics of conflict before being able to resolve it. The internal characteristics of conflict include:

- Perception of the goal – This becomes a problem when success becomes competitive or "doing better than the other person."
- Perception of the other – This can create conflict when the attitude becomes "Us versus them." Any differences are emphasized causing division within a group.
- View of the other's actions – This can be a problem when the situation is competitive rather than cooperative. Behaviour can be seen as suspicious in a competitive environment.
- Definition of problem – This can result in conflict when the size of the problem is escalated, issues are misconstrued, and original issues are lost.
- Communication – Poor communication in a competitive environment can cause mistrust, and information may be withheld or may be lacking.
- Internal group dynamics – This can be negative when the group structure is centralized and rigid rather than safe and open. Conformity is emphasized and tasks dominate over the needs of partners or group members.

These characteristics can strongly influence the behaviour style of group members and affect the potential outcome of the conflict. In some instances, the health service integration initiative coordinator or working group leader's lack of skills to effectively manage and resolve conflict can be the problem.

One approach suggests five modes for conflict resolution:

Confronting is also described as problem-solving, integrating, collaborating or win-win style. It involves the conflicting parties meeting face-to-face and collaborating to reach an agreement that satisfies the concerns of both parties. This style involves open and direct communication which should lead the way to solving the problem. Confronting should be used when:

- Both parties need to win.
- You want to decrease cost.
- You want create a common power base.
- Skills are complementary.
- Time is sufficient.
- Trust is present.
- Learning is the ultimate goal.

Compromising is also described as a "give and take" style. Conflicting parties bargain to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Both parties give up something in order to reach a decision and leave with some degree of satisfaction. Compromising should be used when:

- Both parties need to win.
- You are in a deadlock.
- There is insufficient time.
- You want to maintain the relationship between the involved parties.
- You will get nothing if you do not compromise.
- Stakes are moderate.

Smoothing is also referred to as an accommodating or obliging style. In this approach, the areas of agreement are emphasized and the areas of disagreement are downplayed. Conflicts are not always resolved in the smoothing mode. A party may sacrifice its own concerns or goals in order to satisfy the concerns or goals of the other party. Smoothing should be used when:

- Goal to be reached is overarching.
- You want to create obligation for a trade-off at a later time.
- Stakes are low.
- Liability is limited.
- Any solution is adequate.
- You want to be harmonious and create good will.
- You would lose anyway.
- You want to gain time.

Forcing is also known as a competing, controlling, or dominating style. Forcing occurs when one party goes all out to win its position while ignoring the needs and concerns of the other party. As the intensity of a conflict increases, the tendency for a forced conflict is more likely. This results in a win-lose situation where one party wins at the expense of the other party. Forcing should be used when:

- A "do or die" situation is present.
- Stakes are high.
- Important principles are at stake.
- The relationship between parties is not important.
- A quick decision must be made.

Avoiding is also described as a withdrawal style. This approach is viewed as postponing an issue until later or withdrawing from the situation altogether. It is regarded as a temporary solution because the problem keeps recurring. Avoiding should be used when:

- You cannot win.
- Stakes are low.
- Stakes are high, but you are not prepared.
- You want to gain time.
- You want to maintain neutrality or reputation.
- You think the problem will go away.
- You win by delaying.

Steps for Resolving Group Conflict

Understanding and appreciating various viewpoints are key skills for all group members to develop. However, it requires well-developed team skills, particularly the ability to resolve conflict. This three-step process can help solve group conflict efficiently and effectively.

1. Prepare for resolution.
 - a. **Acknowledge the conflict** – The conflict has to be acknowledged before it can be managed and resolved. Once the group recognizes the issue, it can start the process of resolution.
 - b. **Discuss the impact** – As a group, discuss the impact the conflict is having on group dynamics and performance.
 - c. **Agree to a cooperative process** – Everyone involved must agree to cooperate to resolve the conflict.
 - d. **Agree to communicate** – Most important throughout the resolution process is that everyone keeps communications open. People involved need to talk about the issues and discuss their strong feelings.
2. Understand the Situation.
 - a. **Confirm the group is ready** to resolve the conflict – Understand the situation, and each group member's point of view. Remember that strong emotions are at work here so you have to get through that emotion and reveal the true nature of the conflict.
 - b. **Clarify positions** – Ensure all positions, individuals and factions are clear and understood.
 - c. **List facts, assumptions and beliefs underlying each position** – What does each position believe and value? What information are the positions using as a basis for these beliefs?
 - d. **Analyze in smaller groups** – Break up the group, separating people who are in alliance. In the small groups, analyze each position and the associated facts, assumptions and beliefs. Which facts and assumptions are true and are more important to the outcome? Is additional information required to clarify points of uncertainty or contention? Understanding other people's positions will help the group gain a better understanding of different positions and may reveal new ideas and solutions. Everyone needs to feel heard and acknowledged if a workable solution is to be reached.
 - e. **Reconvene back as a group** – After the small group dialogue, each side is likely to be much closer to reaching agreement. The process of uncovering facts and assumptions allows people to step away from their emotional attachments and see the issue more objectively.
3. Reach agreement.
 - a. The group must decide what decision or **course of action** to take.
 - b. If further analysis is required, **agree what needs to be done**, by when and by whom.

- c. Make sure the **group is committed** to work with the outcome of the proposed analysis.
- d. When conflict is resolved take time to **celebrate and acknowledge** the contributions of everyone. This builds team cohesion and confidence in their problem solving skills.