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Learning the Skills of Conflict Engagement

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Conflict is inevitable in every workplace and may take on many forms. From verbal disagreements between coworkers to the more subtle forms of conflict such as gossip or “eating our young,” everyone will experience conflict throughout their working careers. In healthcare, poorly addressed conflict can be particularly dangerous because the stakes for patient safety and the well being of the people who care for them are incredibly high.

Understanding the link between poorly addressed conflict and the effect of patient safety, The Joint Commission in January 2009 updated their leadership standards to specifically address conflict within healthcare settings. The updated leadership standards require, in part, that organization leaders implement a process for conflict management and that those implementing such processes be skilled in conflict management.

The Avoidance verses Engagement

Developing a strategy to address conflict, although now mandated, may be unfamiliar territory for many in healthcare. Despite conflict's daily presence, most people tend to use avoidance as a strategy when dealing with conflict between their peers, managers or physicians. This happens, in part, because of past experiences when conflict did not lead to a specific resolution.

An engagement approach to con-

flict enlists participants to have constructive conversations that look at the process issues without the goal of resolving any particular conflict. The healthiest work environments encourage these critical conversations that promote dialogues between people and departments. Having the skills to start these dialogues is fundamental in changing a culture from avoidance to engagement.

Learning Conflict Engagement Skills

The good news is that engaging in conflict is a skill that can be learned, practiced and applied to every work setting. It is similar to clinical skills learned in a nursing school setting. For example, when student nurses are learning how to insert an intravenous catheter, they initially learn the theory and the anatomy prior to practicing on a simulated model. Successfully inserting the catheters in real patients happens after the students have gained the initial competencies and practice their new skills. As any seasoned nurse can relate, the more intravenous catheters a nurse inserts, the better they become as it takes practice to become an expert.

Learning conflict engagement skills is a similar process. First, you need the knowledge, then the practice to gain competency and, finally, the coaching during real world scenarios to become skillful at conflict engagement.

To assist healthcare providers with

these vital steps for substantive learning of conflict skills, the Center for American Nurses has developed the Conflict Engagement Portfolio. As a national organization renowned for educating and empowering nurses to advocate for themselves, their profession and their patients, the Center's program combines knowledge, competency and coaching for healthcare professionals that will result in healthier and safer work environments.

The Conflict Engagement Portfolio

The Center's Conflict Engagement Portfolio is designed for every healthcare professional regardless of their background or their current position. Individuals and healthcare organizations may participate in this program that is now being recognized as a significant tool and strategy to creating healthier work environments.

There are three parts to the Conflict Portfolio:

- Part One: The Online Education Module
- Part Two: Skills Based Training for Health Care Professionals
- Part Three: Coaching: Learning to Integrate Conflict Engagement Skills

Part One: The Online Education Module

The Online Education Module is designed to give healthcare providers an overview of the knowledge of conflict. Through the use of case studies and reflective exercises, participants



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will learn about the nature of conflict, how to assess conflict as well as positive conflict behaviors. This CEU module is assessable through the internet and can be used by individuals or groups and can be used as a stand alone offering or the first part of the Center's Conflict Portfolio offerings.

Part Two: Skills Based Training for Health care Professions

This second part of the Conflict Portfolio provides an opportunity to gain competency with conflict engagement. Offered to organizations of all sizes, this on-site training program's curriculum is based on successful training techniques provided to over 5000 healthcare professionals for over a decade. The training emphasizes the integration of knowledge, skills-practice, simulation and coaching to optimally transfer skills to the professional practice environment.

To measure the effectiveness of the training, this program offers a pre and post assessments to determine

the perceived changes in knowledge and skills of the participants.

Part Three: Coaching: Learning to Integrate Conflict Engagement Skills

The third part of the Conflict Portfolio helps those who participated in the Skills Based Training to refine their new skills by examining areas of current conflict within their personal work settings. Through one-on-one or small group coaching sessions, participants will be coached as they integrate their knowledge and new competencies into their own professional practice while discussing their real world conflict scenarios that they have encountered within their own unique work settings. They will gain valuable feedback on their approaches and learn alternative techniques to improve their conflict engagement skills.

Knowledge + Competency + Coaching = Healthy Work Environments

Developing conflict engagement skills requires practice. It also requires a shift away from an avoidance mindset and moving towards the development of a positive attitude towards the benefits of engaging in critical conversations. With programs that emphasize knowledge, competency and coaching, healthcare providers can improve their ability to deal with conflict improve their ability to deal with conflict in both their professional and personal lives.

To Learn More

For more information on the Center for American Nurses Conflict Portfolio, please contact Diane Scott, RN, MSN, Program Director, Center for American Nurses at 1.800.685.4076 or by email at diane.scott@centerforamericannurses.org.

For other resources on conflict, please visit the Center's website at www.centerforamericannurses.org.