Commentary

Clearing the confusion about conflict of interest, conflict management and conflict resolution in educational settings

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Main text

Conflict is an integral part of medical education, and the terms **conflict of interest, conflict management** and **conflict resolution** are commonly used in medical education interchangeably. This confusion is repeatedly highlighted in studies and training courses. Understanding the difference between these three concepts is crucial for researchers, administrators, and teachers to be effective. Our goal is to clear up the confusion surrounding these concepts by defining each term, examining their interrelationships, clarifying similarities and differences, and providing practical insights for their application in educational settings. These practical insights can be directly applied in academic settings, enhancing the reader's understanding and application of the concepts. At first glance, conflict management and conflict resolution seem to have major similarities.

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Both terms describe the active participation of individuals in getting out of conflict situations, and in practice, both approaches are effective and usable together. However, there are major differences between them in terms of a critical approach. **Conflict of interest** occurs when personal or organizational interests are in contrast with professional responsibilities or duties, potentially leading to biased decision-making or unethical behaviors. Contrary to conflict management and conflict resolution, which start with interpersonal or team differences, conflict of interest represents specific situations requiring transparency and consideration of individual or organizational positions to prevent the occurrence of unethical consequences (1). For example, the dean of the medical school may potentially emphasize the priorities of his affiliated educational department in the decisions made at the school level, and the occurrence of such conditions is an example of a conflict of interest.

Keywords: *Conflict of interest; Conflict management; Conflict resolution.*

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In this situation, a particular person or group will benefit from the decisions made instead of the school. Unlike other forms of conflict that can be managed or resolved through effective team communication, mediation, and negotiation, conflict of interest often requires structural solutions such as formulating clear policies, guidelines, and disclosures from decision-making processes to conduct transparency and honesty in decisions. Such strategies can help create a culture of trust by preventing conflicts of interest and ensuring that decisions are made based on regulations (1, 2).

Conflict management refers to the ongoing process of dealing with chronic and intractable conflicts. In educational settings, this could be seen when educational managers in workplaces try to facilitate communication among team members with different values, beliefs, work habits, and styles (3). For instance, a department head might use conflict management strategies to address a disagreement between two teachers over the schedule of classes. Through conflict management, it can be ensured that individuals can work together in a collaborative atmosphere to achieve team goals. Therefore, conflict management does not seek to eliminate or resolve conflicts but provides strategies and techniques to reduce the destructive consequences of conflict situations. In this regard, some experts in the field of conflict management, including Thomas-Kilman, introduce the five styles and strategies of collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising, which can be used in different challenging situations and have various consequences (4). Conflict management is an effective approach in situations where we seek to find the best solution with the participation of all individuals and want everyone's voice to be heard and to use thoughts and ideas. It is also used when there is little possibility of eliminating the conflict; in any case, the conflict about the issue remains between individuals (5).

On the other hand, **conflict resolution** is the process of resolving the underlying issues that cause conflict. In other words, conflict resolution seeks a creative and final solution that satisfies all involved parties. This approach is more targeted than conflict management and aims to address the root causes of conflict instead of managing its symptoms and ending conflicts. Conflict resolution usually focuses on short-term differences that exist in the present moment and probably will not be effective in more significant and long-term issues. Conflict resolution often works through strategies such as identifying underlying problems and problem-solving techniques (4). For example, suppose two educational departments in a faculty

conflict with the allocation of resources. In that case, conflict resolution involves a structured dialogue to reach an agreed-upon solution, which can include re-evaluating the distribution of resources based on the department's current needs. Conflict resolution can be helpful in situations where conflict arises due to differences in job roles and tasks or inappropriate communication at the workplace at micro levels (5).

While conflict management and conflict resolution are closely related, they pursue different goals in a broader framework. This confusion is not only conceptual but also creates consequences in the professional life of health professionals in terms of understanding and dealing with workplace conflicts. For example, a university that does not distinguish conflict management from conflict resolution may focus heavily on ending conflicts without addressing the underlying issues that caused them. Similarly, misunderstanding a conflict of interest can lead to ethical violations and long-term damage among individuals and teams. This underlines the importance of being cautious and attentive when dealing with conflicts in educational settings. In addition, applying conflict management is mostly more feasible in complex educational environments because many factors are involved in the conflict, and it is impossible to solve all the fundamental issues through conflict resolution. On the other hand, using the conflict resolution strategy to eliminate existing problems on more minor scales and in interpersonal communication can prevent the rooting of issues in the future. Moreover, conflict resolution should use various strategies and styles of conflict management and conflict of interest control to achieve goals.

Understanding these distinctions is crucial for effectively managing conflicts in any environment, particularly in educational settings. Misunderstanding or conflating these terms can lead to ineffective strategies that may worsen conflicts. For universities, having clear policies and providing training and awareness on conflict management, conflict resolution, and addressing conflicts of interest are essential (6). Managers and educational leaders must discern when to use conflict management techniques and when to seek conflict resolution. Furthermore, universities must establish robust mechanisms to identify and address conflicts of interest to uphold ethical standards and trust. Lastly, universities play a significant role in shaping the development of future leaders and professionals. By incorporating these distinctions into their curricula and educational modules, universities can ensure that their graduates are equipped with the necessary skills to effectively manage conflicts and uphold ethical standards in their professional practice.

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