Conflict Management in Medical Education

Disagreement and conflict are an inevitability among clinical teams given the fast-paced and high-stakes nature of healthcare. Conflict, as a result, affects communication and workflow productivity in medical settings (Lee, 2013). Medical education and healthcare are hierarchical environments and conflicts often span different levels of the educational hierarchy, making it essential that conflict management approaches in these arenas should ensure the preservation of the learning environment. Providing feedback to the person who made the microaggression is essential for creating insight and motivating behavior change. Achieving these outcomes requires skill development by the responder, i.e., the person who witnessed the microaggression, as well as the individual who experienced the microaggression.

The authors offer these key points for successful use of GRIT: (1) separate the person from the comment; (2) avoid personal attacks or “you” statements ("You are a racist" is not helpful); (3) if you witness a microaggression, do not speak for the affected person. The person who witnessed the microaggression should be given the opportunity to clarify or realize the potential negative impact of the words or action. The authors also offer a four-part response framework for managing microaggressions: (1) Talk it out; (2) Inquire; (3) Restate; (4) Diffuse. Dialogue is an important part of this process.

Talk it out

Talk about the comment in a supportive and compassionate way. Clarify exactly what was said (remember to paraphrase). Identify the statement as a microaggression and explain why it is unhelpful. Identify the impact of the action on the individual and on teamwork. Be nonjudgmental in discussing the comment.

Inquire

Inquire about the sender’s intentions and context of the comment. Ask questions to determine whether the sender was aware of the impact of the comment and to help the person realize the harm that was done. For example: "What did you mean by that statement?" Be nonjudgmental. Address the comment or action rather than the person who made it.

Restate

Restate the message to clarify or realize the potential negative impact of the words or action. The person who witnessed the microaggression should be given the opportunity to clarify the statement or acknowledge the impact. Be sure to capture the message the sender intended to convey, and then discuss how the statement could have been managed more effectively. For example: "I heard that you were trying to make a joke, but it was hurtful to me and my colleagues. Would you like to talk about it more?"

Diffuse

Diffuse the potential impact on others and your personal perception. "I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable right now. It's difficult for me to hear this," or "I want to talk about this more but I feel uncomfortable right now." Diffuse is an important part of this process. Dialogue is an important part of this process.

This four-part method supports the heart and soul of conflict management: (1) Empathy and awareness; (2) Communication and understanding; (3) Empowerment and responsibility; (4) Resolution and change. Dialogue is an important part of this process.

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