RETAINING NURSES THROUGH CONFLICT RESOLUTION

R etaining sufficient nursing staff is one of the more critical problems healthcare administrators face. The nursing shortage can be traced, to a large extent, to the high turnover among nurses and to the large numbers of nurses who simply leave the profession.[1]

A fundamental lack of interest in nursing among those who might otherwise enter the profession may have some bearing on the nursing shortage, but the primary problem relates to the retention of nurses: Something happens to cause nurses to quit their jobs or leave the profession.

One might assume that nurses find out after entering the field that they do not like nursing, but evidence suggests they enjoy their work[2] and believe they contribute significantly to healthcare.[3] Therefore factors other than the work itself must be causing nurses to change employers or leave nursing. Two such factors relate to impotence:

• Nurses feel they have little say in running the healthcare system.[4]

• Nurses feel they have little control over issues for which they are held responsible.[5]

Training Staff to Confront Problems And Communicate Openly Can Improve the Work Climate

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This feeling of powerlessness causes nurses to view administrators, physicians, and others as adversaries and creates conflict and divided loyalties.[6] Thus we might attribute the nurse retention difficulty to nurses' response to organizational conflict. If administrators understood the nature of that response to conflict, its impact on job tenure and loyalty to the profession, and how to foster a more appropriate conflict resolution style, they might be better able to retain their nursing staff.

Summary   The way nurses resolve conflict may be leading them to quit their jobs or leave the profession altogether. Conflict is inevitable in a dynamic organization. What is important is not to avoid conflict but to seek its resolution in a constructive manner.

Organizational conflict is typically resolved through one of five strategies: withdrawal, force, conciliation, compromise, or confrontation.

A recent study of nurses in three different hospitals showed that the approach they use most is withdrawal. This might manifest itself in a request to change shifts or assignments and may lead to a job change and, eventually, abandonment of the field altogether. Given this scenario, changing nurses' conflict resolution style may help administrators combat the nursing shortage.

Healthcare organizations must examine themselves to determine why nurses so frequently use withdrawal; then they must restructure work relationships as needed. Next, organizations need to increase nurses' awareness of the problem and train them to use a resolution style more conducive to building stable relationships: confrontation.

Staff should also be trained in effective communications skills to develop trust and openness in their relationships.

FEEDBACK

SELF
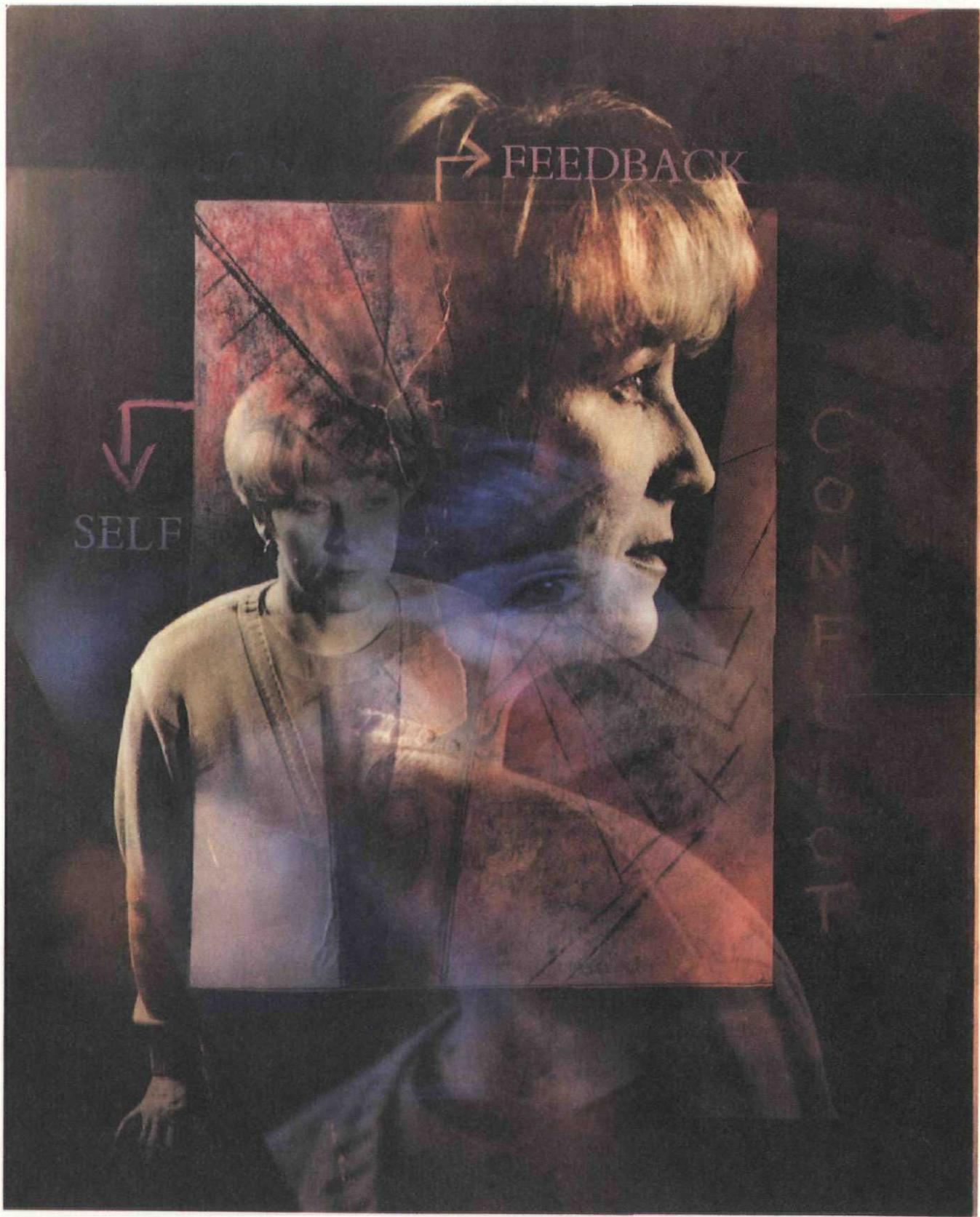
CONFLICT

Scott Ferguson

THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

Conflict is not inherently bad for an organization; it is inevitable in a dynamic environment. Therefore it is not necessarily desirable to eliminate conflict within an organization; rather, it is necessary to handle it effectively and positively. How complex organizations handle conflict is a good indication of the extent to which they are able to integrate the frequently competing issues of concern for relationships and concern for outcomes[7] (see **Figure**).

Organizational conflict is typically resolved through one of five strategies[8]:

1. *Withdrawal.* Here the conflict is of little or no significance to either party. This approach normally reflects their lack of concern for the outcome of the conflict or for their relationship. In some cases withdrawal is used when one or both parties do care about the outcomes and the relationship but are attempting to deny that concern to avoid hostility or other difficulties in resolving the conflict. This denies the opportunity to build trust and creates an environment that may facilitate the departure of one or both parties. It is a lose-lose strategy.

2. *Forcing.* This is found when differences in organizational power allow individuals in influential positions to force outcomes regardless of their effect on or the desires of the other party. It indicates a lack of concern for the relationship between the parties and creates resentment and hostility in the losing party. Forcing is a win-lose strategy.

3. *Conciliation.* In this approach, one party, eager to preserve the relationship, will give in to settle the conflict. It can lead to resentment in the party giving in, particularly when the other party does not reciprocate on other issues. It is a lose-win strategy.

4. *Compromise.* Here the parties, concerned for both relationship and outcomes, seek a solution that is an acceptable intermediate position between their divergent interests. It is seen as a fair way to settle conflict, but can leave both parties with a sense of loss. It works well with groups that have complex relationships and interests, but fails to satisfy the needs of interpersonal relationships because it avoids finding a common ground of understanding that would allow for a mutually satisfactory solution. It is, therefore, a lose-lose strategy when used by individuals.

5. *Confrontation.* This involves meeting the problem head-on by searching for the underlying reasons for the conflict. Parties can resolve issues more fundamentally by identifying all their concerns, clarifying erroneous or divergent assumptions, focusing on the real reasons for the con-

MODES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION
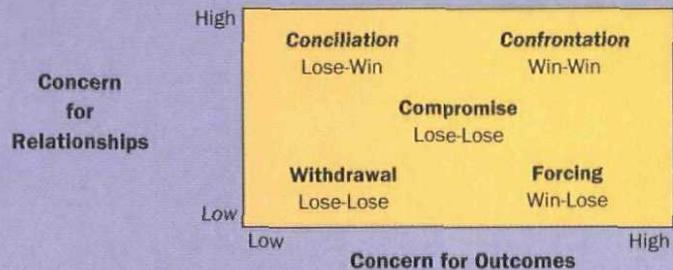
Modified from D. E. Wolfe and S. C. Bushardt, "Interpersonal Conflict: Strategies and Guidelines for Resolution," *Journal of the American Medical Records Association*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1985, p. 18.

flict, and working toward a mutually satisfying resolution. It is more time-consuming and difficult than the other approaches but offers a chance to build lasting trust and understanding between the parties and to achieve win-win outcomes to conflict.

Conflict in organizations is inevitable but generally resolvable. The important issue is not to engage in a futile attempt to avoid conflict but to seek its resolution in a constructive manner. Effective conflict management enhances the functioning of organizations, whereas poor conflict management leads to dysfunction.

NURSES' STRATEGY

A survey of nurses in three different hospitals indicates that nurses are consistent in their approach to conflict resolution.[9] This suggests that nurses' conflict resolution styles are an attribute of the profession and have little or nothing to do with employer or demographic differences.

The study found that the primary mode of conflict resolution among nurses is withdrawal. Thus it is no surprise that healthcare institutions suffer from substantial turnover in their nursing staffs or that large numbers of nurses leave the profession. When nurses encounter conflict, they intentionally avoid the specific situation or relationship, to the point of requesting a change in work assignments or shifts, or even changing jobs. Eventually, if faced with continuing conflict, they might leave the profession altogether. Given this scenario, a change in conflict resolution style might well lead to a greater likelihood of nurses remaining with the same employer or at least within the profession.

At the other extreme, forcing is the conflict resolution style used least by nurses, even though

Confrontation offers parties in conflict a chance to build lasting trust and understanding and to achieve win-win outcomes.

they themselves may be subjected to it. This is consistent with nurses' feelings that they have little control in their jobs and indicates they are not in a position of imposing their solution to problems on those they work with, that they have little or no authority or power to do so.

Having little authority but substantial responsibility, nurses cannot afford to develop much interest in work relationships or conflict outcomes. Moreover, in the second and third most-used styles—compromise and conciliation—the nurses lose in conflict resolution.

Given these findings, it is no wonder that nurses extend their withdrawal from the conflicts they face to include withdrawal from the organization or profession.

ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSES

Two changes are needed to address the issues raised here.

Self-Examination and Restructuring Healthcare organizations should examine themselves to determine why nurses so frequently use withdrawal to deal with conflict—an indication that neither the nurse nor the organization has much concern about the outcome of the conflict or the relationship between them. It indicates the nurse's lack of concern because he or she makes a conscious choice to leave the relationship. It indicates the organization's lack of concern because it allows the continuation of an environment in which nurses find no more acceptable means of resolving conflict.

An effort by organizations to restructure work relationships to increase nurses' authority and feelings of control as they exercise their responsibilities might help stabilize their employment and support their commitment to the profession. Such a changed work environment might allow nurses to modify their conflict resolution style, thereby reducing the problems associated with withdrawal.

Awareness and Training Organizations should increase nurses' awareness of the problem and train them to use confrontation, a conflict resolution style more conducive to building stable work relationships. Given such training, nurses would be able to consciously change their behavior and would be much more receptive to organizational efforts to initiate change in the workplace.

Such conflict resolution training should be made available to nurses on the job through some form of in-service or continuing education program. This training should also be available in nursing-degree programs, concentrating on the development of the student's primary conflict resolution style with the understanding that each of the styles may be appropriate, depending on the importance of the issues and the relationship between the individuals.

Such training should develop awareness of all the conflict resolution modes, while stressing confrontation as the one likely to yield optimal results in most situations.

TRAINING FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Appropriate Style A first requirement in training nurses, hospital administrators, and other staff to effectively resolve conflict is to recognize that, in specific circumstances, each style is applicable[10]:

• Forcing is appropriate when the issue requires an immediate solution, consistent across an organization, and one party has the clear authority to impose a decision.

• Conciliation is best when a complete solution can be postponed or when the parties have a limited, temporary relationship that does not require a definitive solution between them.

• Withdrawal works best when the parties have no real relationship or any real need to resolve their differences.

• Compromise is preferred when the issue is highly complex, involving two or more entrenched interests and not offering any win-win options. In this situation a compromise is better than no resolution at all.

Each of these styles is, in effect, an expedient suitable for special circumstances. However, for a long-term resolution to real problems, the confrontation or problem-solving style is clearly superior. In it the parties work to identify the underlying problem causing the conflict and seek a win-win solution to it.

In carrying out a confrontational approach, the

> **I**f trained in the use of confrontation, nurses would be much more receptive to organizational efforts to initiate change.

A MODEL FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

• Bring together those in conflict.

• Introduce concept of different conflict resolution styles and situations when each is appropriate.

• Explain the advantages of confrontation as the "best" style for most effective resolution.

• Present rules for the effective use of confrontation in a "win-win" manner.

• Concentrate on teaching effective communication and team-building skills.

• Seek to improve overall trust and openness using feedback and self-disclosure per Johari Window.

• Encourage and reinforce the use of confrontation as a means of effectively resolving the conflict that inevitably occurs in any organization.

parties need to follow several rules[11]:

• Be clear about the underlying assumptions: (1) Mutually satisfactory agreement is possible, (2) only win-win solutions are acceptable, and (3) resolution will be based on agreement, not power.

• Identify the issue to be confronted.

• Confront the issue, not other participants.

• Be an active, effective listener.

• Avoid becoming defensive or getting sidetracked.

• Recognize and express the importance of the relationship.

• Focus on solving the problem.

• Keep overall organizational objectives in mind.

• Include a neutral third party to aid communications.

Communication The second requirement for effectively resolving conflict, particularly when seeking a long-term resolution through confrontation, is to train participants in the use of effective communications skills to develop trust and openness in their relationship. A powerful technique for accomplishing this is the Johari Window.[12] It essentially involves using self-disclosure and feedback to increase participants' knowledge of themselves and each other (see **Figure**).

In this model the goal is to increase the area referred to as the "open arena," the area of mutual knowledge and understanding. To initiate this increase, the parties must be willing to be more open and sharing about themselves, thereby decreasing the "hidden self." In addition, they should be more responsive to feedback from others and to experimentation in their own behavior to decrease the "blind self."

As the parties learn more about each other, the area of mutual knowledge and open trust called the "open arena" increases. This allows for further self-disclosure and additional feedback and leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of growing trust and openness until both parties understand the position of the other and, eventually, use that understanding to reach a mutually acceptable agreement covering the immediate issue in conflict, as well as the underlying conditions that caused it.

AN IMPROVED WORK CLIMATE

If the parties to the conflict are trained to recognize the nature of the conflict situation, the value of confronting the underlying issues, the rules of effective confrontation, and the need for open and trusting communications, they will be well on their way to resolving conflict between them in constructive, mutually acceptable ways.

JOHARI WINDOW: INFORMATION ON SELF

From J. Luft, *Group Processes: An Introduction to Group Dynamics*, 3d ed., Mayfield Publishing, Mountain View, CA, 1984. Used with permission.
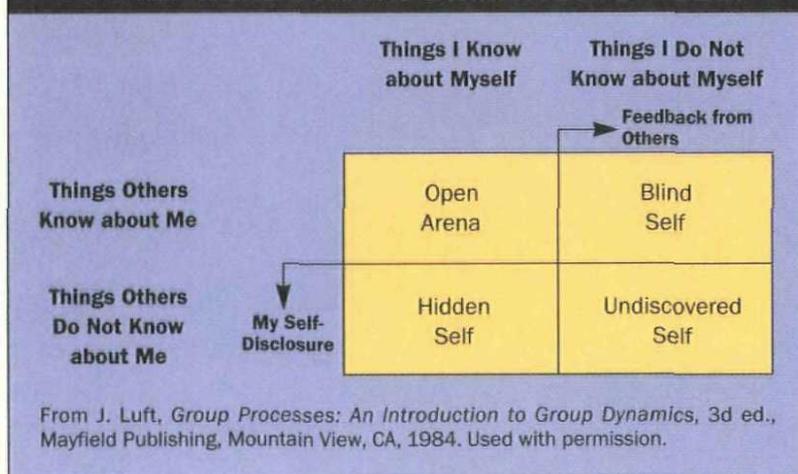
Furthermore, as the parties begin resolving conflict with win-win outcomes, the incidence of conflict should decrease and the level of mutual respect and concern should increase. Successful resolution to conflict will lead to an improved work climate. □

As the parties begin resolving conflict with win-win outcomes, the incidence of conflict should decrease.

NOTES

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