

# Case III: Managing Conflict—The Case of the Faculty Stuck in the Middle

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*Abstract:* The need for administrative faculty members to have superior leadership and management skills to handle their increasingly complex responsibilities is well established. As a part of the 2000-01 ADEA Leadership Institute curriculum, fellows were responsible for developing situational case studies for a faculty development workshop to develop participants' leadership and management skills. The case presented here involved managing conflicts in the dental academic setting. The foundation of conflict management centers on communication techniques including transparent communication, open discussion, open confrontation, and active listening. Management options such as avoidance, accommodation, competition, negotiation, and collaboration are potential strategies for the faculty leader. This case study involves a fictitious public dental school, New Horizons University, which has embarked on solutions to address limited resources, but unwittingly has created conflicts between individuals and groups of faculty members. The case discussion analyzes the cause of conflicts, presents the positive and negative potential of the conflicts, reviews techniques of conflict management, and discusses specific management concepts regarding resource allocation and equity theory.

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Managing conflict is an arduous but necessary task. Conflict may be a prime mover for opportunity or it may precipitate anxiety, uncertainty, and stress. Many authors agree that conflict is inevitably present in social, industrial, educational, government, and religious organizations.<sup>1,2</sup>

Resolution of conflict, as tempting as it may seem, should not necessarily be the goal. In most situations, this elusive solution should be replaced by the goal of managing, rather than resolving conflict. Managing conflict recognizes that some situations may result in progressive achievements, while others do not have an ideal win-win situation for all. The leadership challenge is to adapt to environmental shifts and capitalize on the constructive potential in conflict management, while reducing the destructive possibilities.<sup>1,3,4</sup> To be an effective leader, one must recognize the sources of conflict, develop skills in managing conflict, and capitalize on the positive and negative potential of a given situation.<sup>5</sup>

This case first explores techniques of conflict management as well as the positive and negative factors that may exert progressive or detrimental influences. Second, a case scenario is presented; and finally, the central issues of the case are highlighted and relevant management concepts are reviewed.

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## The Management Approach

The foundation of conflict management centers on communication, the ability to apply the proper method of managing the conflict, and the recognition of the resulting positive and negative influences. This case study provides a fact pattern that should elicit discussion regarding appropriate conflict management and communication within the administration, between administration and faculty, and within the faculty. As will often happen in trying to resolve one problem, unanticipated new problems arise. In this case, New Horizons University Dental School has created new faculty academic tracks, clinical and research, to help meet its ever-increasing school mission with limited resources. The Restorative Department Chair, Dr. Middleman, faces conflicts between individual members of his department, between the tenure and nontenure-track restorative faculty members, and between the school's faculty and administration. The general goal in conflict management and communication is to allow the people to participate in the process and to engineer an action plan that allows the people to resolve the conflict with dignity.<sup>2</sup>

## Communication

Several communication techniques and approaches should be considered in resolving or in avoiding conflict. First is *transparent communication*. Transparent communication depends on clear presentation of factual information that is not shrouded with personal bias and deceit. In an effort to depersonalize the issue, discussions should focus on issues and not personalities. The message or goals must be clearly apparent to all those involved. The simplest way to ensure that communication has been clear and transparent is to debrief by asking each person to define the problem, goals, and decision. As they articulate responses, it becomes evident whether or not communication has been clear.<sup>1,6</sup>

A second communication method requires *open discussion of issues*. Open forums and town meetings have become quite popular in the political, social, and business environments. Open discussion ensures direct consideration of the conflict, immediate feedback, and possible redirection. Informality generally characterizes these active listening sessions in which the administration takes the casual approach of “I’m here, we have concerns, let’s talk.” Administrators recognize that open communication creates trust, and trust sets the stage for communicating and understanding issues of the conflict.<sup>7</sup>

As an example, cheating by students could be a general topic for open discussion of issues in academics. Cheating is a common academic leadership challenge which may be manageable in open discussions. The academic arena encourages exploration of traditional as well as creative management concepts. One technique in applying a creative approach requires that the discussants separate the issues from the personality. One must keep asking, “What is the issue?” instead of allowing Dr. A to play the role as chair while Dr. B plays the role of opponent or student advocate. The traditional approach may be to establish prevention as a goal and define the punishment as a consequence. A second approach focuses on setting values such as trust. If this assumption is accepted, the issue becomes global. The challenge then becomes one of creating a system to evaluate students and ensure that students have learned as individuals or as a group. If the issue shifts to a goal of learning, then cheating becomes a non-issue. This conflict may be managed or redirected.<sup>2</sup>

In more intense situations, the communication platform may be *open confrontation* of controversial

issues.<sup>4</sup> Open confrontation is potentially volatile, so caution and leadership skills are essential to limit discussion to substantive disagreements and to eliminate personalization. Small groups, privacy, and clear expression of the purpose of the discussion become essential ingredients. All parties must understand that central issues must not be distorted or misdirected by tangential factors or personality differences. The group goal is to resolve conflict amicably.

*Active listening* by the mediator or primary administrator pays dividends. It provides all parties in conflict with the opportunity to express their concerns. Active listening also demonstrates that the administrator is interested and unbiased. And finally, it gives the administrator the chance to ask the questions that may clarify the basic cause of the conflict.<sup>2</sup>

## Timing

Timing in conflict communication is essential.<sup>1</sup> An immediate response demonstrates that the administration is involved, aware, and committed to mutual progress. Scholars and industrialists may debate the advantages and disadvantages of direct, open, and prompt communication related to the recent Ford/Firestone crisis. Ford elected to present immediate public reassurance of a commitment to quality, whereas Firestone initially withheld comments pending investigations. Perhaps in a tragedy such as this, there can never be clear winners, but subsequent losses may be minimized by timely communication and appropriate redirection or crisis conversion.

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## Management Options

There are numerous methods for managing conflict. Although many situations require tailoring an approach on a case-by-case basis, one may select from several general approaches. Ann Lucas lists the options as avoidance, accommodation, competition, negotiation, and collaboration.<sup>6</sup> Her descriptions of these choices are summarized here.

*Avoidance* is a strategy that may be acceptable and preferred. The administrator recognizes a conflict, but elects not to address the issue. In the example of personal disputes or personality conflicts, avoidance may be a viable option. However, disagreements that tend to be short-lived may go away or they may escalate. It may be advisable to observe for signs of recurrence or escalation.

A second management choice is *accommodation* in which the goal is harmony. By accommodating, the manager sacrifices to placate the individual. This goal has short-term advantages, but the accumulated effects of attempting to “please all the people all the time” may have undesirable consequences.

A strategy of *competition* is based on eventual dominance of one party over the other. By following the rules of competition, the stage may be set for a win-lose outcome. The benefits of this outcome will, of course, vary according to the individual’s point of view and satisfaction with the solution. Caution dictates that managers be alert for a possible backlash in which losers may form allegiances because such factionalization may be a precursor to additional conflict.

Conflict management by *negotiation* presumes that both parties are willing to make smaller concessions for the greater gain. The skill required is that the leader must mediate and appreciate the willingness of the parties in conflict to give and take. The obvious downside of this strategy is the potential resentment by both parties of their losses or concessions in order to achieve their gains.

*Collaboration* has the most ambitious goal, which is to create a win-win situation where both parties are satisfied that their needs and goals are met. The example Lucas uses is an open forum for office space assignment. Office space is often a source of contention among employees, but a collaborative approach to office space assignment can be effective if employees collectively identify the problem and salient issues, suggest potential solutions, and establish ground rules that acknowledge the seniority and rank of members of the department. Lucas points out that such a collaborative approach can be effective in an academic environment if junior members of the department are provided an opportunity to define the criteria for office space assignment, understand the goals of space allocation, and have a forum to identify their own expectations for future rewards.

## Conflict as a Positive Factor

The academic community of scholars appears to welcome discussions, expect arguments, and tolerate challenges. These challenges become the foundation of advancing scholarship and pedagogy for they may spawn innovation or positive redirection.<sup>1,4,6</sup> As an example, restorative dentists and materials

scientists have debated the importance of esthetics versus function. Some contend that the durability features of the amalgam restorations should preempt esthetic concerns; others contend that the esthetic features of composite resin and porcelain restorations are more important. Fortunately, both groups listen to the third party in the conflict—the patients—and significant improvements have resulted. Thus the issue evolves from longest-lasting versus best appearance to an issue of improvement of materials and methods to produce more esthetic, durable restorations.

## Conflict as a Negative Factor

Conflict varies on a scale from latent to volatile. Furthermore, a specific conflict may move along the scale depending on the situation or stimulus. Negative issues usually arise from concerns of governance, personal equity, or resource allotments.<sup>1</sup>

Academicians generally expect a voice or influence in *governance*. When this expectation is unfulfilled, conflict arises.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, newer strategic planning initiatives include a participatory planning activity to avoid this sense of exclusion in governance.<sup>9,10</sup>

*Personnel equity* is also always a concern. The notions of equal treatment, equal pay, and equal recognition are frequently unattainable. Equality or equity may be achievable; however, frequently equality is unrealistic.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the human ego rarely recognizes oneself as equal to the peer groups. Individuals generally assume they are smarter, work harder, and deserve more than others.

The third issue that exemplifies the negative aspect of conflict is *resource allocations*. Resources may be allocated in several ways, each of which has the potential for negative feedback.<sup>10</sup> These include traditional incremental budgeting, administrative preference, and strategic choices. Any allocation of resources has negative potential if there is a perception of inequality.

The negative effects of conflict may become quite severe.<sup>1,10</sup> Conflict may lead to fear of losing control over one’s life and work. As a result, administrators may experience a decline of self-confidence. A perception may be created in which external constituents determine success or failure. And, in the absence of critical review or failure to communicate effectively in reinforcing institutional goals, one may spiral into increasingly complex situations or crisis.<sup>10</sup> Failure to communicate, failure to resolve conflict,

and failure to apply leadership skills inevitably result in lack of trust and absence of self-confidence.

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## Case Review: Stuck in the Middle

Dr. George Middleman, chair of the Department of Restorative Dentistry at New Horizons University Dental School, was listening politely to one of his faculty members, Dr. Rick Tenyre, as he explained why he was so upset with fellow prosthodontist Dr. Hal Clinique. Dr. Tenyre had been keeping meticulous notes, tallying over and over again, the number of hours that Dr. Clinique had been spending in the Faculty Practice. He was convinced that Dr. Clinique was ignoring his other faculty responsibilities to take advantage of the opportunities in the practice to supplement his income. Dr. Tenyre also pointed out that Dr. Clinique is allowed an afternoon each week for planning and administration. “What’s he got to plan anyway, whether to show up on the clinic floor on time or not?” Dr. Tenyre grumbled. “It’s your job as chair to keep him in line, and it sure doesn’t seem like you’re doing it.”

Despite his best efforts to listen attentively to Dr. Tenyre, Dr. Middleman found himself thinking back to last week’s Dean/Department Chair meeting. The meeting had started with a discussion of sources of revenue and opportunities to limit expenses. Dean Decater emphasized the need to develop the New Horizons University Faculty Practice into a viable financial entity that would help support all of its expenses, including faculty incentives, as well as generate funds to support educational programs. He asked all of the chairs to support the efforts in faculty practice of their more productive practitioners, which in Dr. Middleman’s department are the clinical-track faculty. The discussion also included the issues related to the retention and recruitment of faculty, a timely topic at New Horizons University, where five faculty positions had been open for several months, including two in his own department.

Dr. Middleman had been at New Horizons, a publicly funded dental school, for many years, and he couldn’t help but think how times had changed in dental education. There were gaps in compensation between private practitioners and faculty in the past, but not nearly as large a difference as in today’s market. The dynamic and technically sophisticated na-

ture of both clinical education and research have made it increasingly difficult to find the classic “triple threat” faculty of the past. New Horizons has recently gone the route of other dental schools by hiring faculty on tracks other than a traditional tenure track, creating clinical tracks and research tracks for more specialized faculty. This had been an emotional issue with many of the “old guard” departmental faculty, many of whom now treat clinical-track faculty as second-class citizens because they do not have a specified scholarly role in the school. This has created a rift in Dr. Middleman’s department, where one-third of the faculty are now on the clinical track. The conflicts have been demonstrated in a number of different ways, in particular in the area of faculty workloads and in the promotion and tenure process in the school.

Although Dr. Middleman rarely agreed with the dean, he had consented to support the new academic tracks in desperation, hoping that he might be able to recruit faculty into the department. Initially it seemed to have a positive effect in filling vacant faculty positions, but now he was wondering if it was worth all of the hassles that have arisen. The tenure-track faculty perceive that the clinical-track faculty, such as Dr. Clinique, are only committed to supplementing their income. They also don’t understand why clinical-track faculty workload assignments allow them to work in the school’s faculty practice clinic more than the tenure-track faculty, who are limited to one day per week.

The clinical-track faculty, on the other hand, have made it well known that they are upset with their lower base salaries compared to the tenure-track faculty and the compensation of their private practice counterparts. They recognize that the tenure-track faculty have been in the system for a longer period of time and, therefore, have a longer history of performance raises. However, many of the clinical-track faculty members were hired with numerous years of clinical experience in private practice and feel that they should be compensated for that. “No one put a gun to their heads and forced them to agree to work here at a lower base salary. They knew the deal coming in,” Dr. Tenyre would comment. “They can just go back to their old offices. I for one wouldn’t stop them.”

In addition, the clinical-track faculty complain that they have far less flexibility in their weekly schedules, and they look at the tenure-track faculties’ scheduled scholarly and educational planning time as a joke. Dr. Clinique had been heard to quip, “I

wish I had several hours per week to decide which carousel of 1985 slides to use in my course.”

Dr. Middleman was becoming increasingly frustrated with the faculty members' inability to work together in the department. The tension had recently increased over the last several months as a number of the clinical-track faculty had gone through the mandatory university interim review in the promotion and tenure process. The clinical-track faculty members were upset with the recommendations of the committees that they should pursue more scholarly activities at the school. Although many of the faculty did present abstracts and posters at national meetings and had a modest number of publications, they did not consider these activities as part of their expectations for promotion. Indeed, the promotion guidelines did not state scholarly activities as an absolute requirement. However, the vast majority of faculty review committee members were tenure-track faculty, who interpreted the guidelines to read that there is an implied scholarly commitment in all academic appointments.

In addition, Dr. Clinique was adding fuel to the fire by distributing a list of all faculty salaries to other clinical-track faculty in the department to illustrate the gap in compensation. He conveniently failed to include the faculty practice incentives, some of which provide significant income for certain clinical-track faculty members. Based on the compensation issue and the perception of unfair criteria for promotion, there were rumors of a mass exodus of clinical-track faculty from the school. Dr. Middleman knew that Dr. Clinique had just met with Dean Decater earlier in the day to negotiate for additional compensation and a change in the structure of the faculty review committee.

As Dr. Tenyre finished his lengthy oratory, Dr. Middleman pondered possible strategies that he could use to resolve the conflicts between his faculty members. “Thanks, Rick,” Dr. Middleman said, “but I can't really get into meaningful discussion on it right now. I'll look into the situation and get together with you to discuss it further.”

As Dr. Tenyre left, he pounded his fist on Dr. Middleman's desk, saying, “If you don't do something about this, I'll take you all to court if I have to.”

With Rick's words echoing in his head, Dr. Middleman pondered the resource and personnel issues of the department. Maybe it was a good time to take that vacation.

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## Case Analysis

New Horizons University represents a dental school in transition. The significant increase in the demands on the faculty that resulted included increased pressure to keep curriculum contemporary in the face of innovations in treatment and technology; to increase revenues through research grants; and to increase revenues through the clinics. The New Horizons administration had determined that a viable solution is the use of nontenure-track faculty. Therefore, the number of clinical track faculty members was increasing. As a result, there was a shift from the traditional three dimensional to two or one dimensional faculty profile. Consequently, differences in assignments and expectations became more evident. The disparities among faculty position descriptions were widening, jealousies were surfacing, and signs of decline in morale were apparent.

The second major influence on the school was the pressure to recruit and retain faculty. The gap between private practice and academic salaries was expanding; the gap between base salaries of tenure-track and nontenure-track faculty was increasing; the pressure for faculty to generate practice revenues was increasing; and the expectations for teaching time commitments were changing between the two developing factions. The salary inequities were being scrutinized.

Two central issues evolved from this case. These dilemmas were multifactoral, complex, and subject to broad interpretations. For convenience, therefore, they are addressed as two global issues: resentment and allocation of scarce resources. Some of the subordinate factors are combined in the presentation of the relevant management concepts.

### Central Issue #1: Resentment

Dr. Tenyre complained to the chairman, Dr. Middleman. His contention was that others were given preferential treatment. He alleged that Dr. Clinique exceeded his private practice time to increase his income at the expense of other responsibilities. Second, he voiced dissatisfaction with the fact that tenure-track faculty had higher base salaries and fewer hours of scheduled activities than the clinical track faculty. Meanwhile, Dr. Clinique's complaints echoed the feelings of many clinical-track faculty, that time spent in “scholarly activity” is ba-

sically free time or, at best, nonproductive. There was a sense among clinical-track faculty that they had to “work” harder to earn their compensation (that is, treat patients and cover more clinical sessions), and they still earned less than their private practice counterparts. Finally, clinical-track faculty perceived that they had an uncertain future in dental education because the faculty review committees were primarily staffed by tenured faculty members who did not value their contributions to the schools.

**Relevant Management Principle: Equity Theory.** Adams developed equity theory to analyze the assessment of inputs to output.<sup>2</sup> The inputs prior to Dr. Clinique could be educational achievements, specialty certification, clinical experience, prestige, academic experience, or scholarly achievements. The performance inputs of a current academic position include the number of institutional hours, administrative responsibilities (such as serving as a course director), service commitments, and research expectations. The output, or actual achievements, may include outcome measures such as practice revenue, clinic production, publications, external performance indicators (board examinations), etc. As an administrator, the first assumption is that a group of dental educators are a fairly homogenous group. However, after examining credentials, performance, and expectations, it becomes quickly apparent that any group of faculty is actually quite diverse. Chairs and deans recognize that equality among individuals is impossible. Herein is the challenge: a diverse group of people. This challenge is exaggerated by the perception of most faculty that they work longer and more effectively than others. When a faculty member compares input to output, he or she frequently concludes inequity as a result of self-assessment. Further complicating the situation is the reliance on salary as the common yardstick of value.

## Central Issue #2: Scarce Resources

New Horizons University was faced with issues related to limited resources. The school and the department were attempting to deal with lack of faculty, development of new revenue streams, and creative allocation of available funds.

**Relevant Management Concept: Resource Allocation.** In the public institutional setting, all schools must be prepared for the potential of increased or reduced state funding. In addition, the other traditional academic revenue streams—grants,

philanthropic or endowment funds, and clinical income—vary from year to year. Aside from dollars, other principle resources are people, material, information, and time.<sup>8</sup> New Horizons had attempted to solve its financial and faculty resource shortages through a restructuring of faculty responsibilities. By creating alternative faculty tracks, it was hoped that faculty could be recruited and retained through higher remuneration funded by revenues generated in clinical practice (clinical track) or research grants (research track). It was also anticipated that by creating annual faculty workload expectations that allowed expert clinicians to excel in patient care and expert researchers to excel in scholarly activity, the department and the school would increase its overall revenues while providing a work environment that was more rewarding to the faculty.

Although the case study doesn't give us all the details of the interactions leading up to the current conflicts at New Horizons, it is likely that the central and departmental administration's management approach was poorly executed in either the timing of communication or the communication method itself. The “old-guard” faculty members have not bought into the concept of the new faculty tracks, including Dr. Middleman himself. The fact that he acted out of desperation to solve the faculty resource issue indicates that he felt there were considerable downsides to use of clinical-track faculty and/or that these negatives had not been properly addressed to allow for success. The initial communication of the resource issues facing New Horizons should have been clearly presented to all faculty members by the central and departmental administration. A faculty-wide forum could have been an effective strategy to allow open discussions and articulation of concerns by the faculty. This type of communication has the potential of developing trust among all involved faculty members, although it would require a skilled leader to manage the likely open confrontation in such a setting and channel it into constructive conflict resolution.

The administration could have provided a setting such as a faculty-wide forum where active listening could occur and where basic issues of the conflict could be clarified. This forum may also have provided the administration with insight into the anticipated issues that often arise when new strategies are proposed to resolve problems. Whether or not this domino effect could have been avoided is a good discussion point. This lack of communication may have occurred at any, or all, points in the process,

from development, through implementation, and ultimately the assessment of outcomes. As a department chair, Dr. Middleman is the link between the faculty and school administration. If he was able to identify that the communication between these two groups was not sufficient, he was in a unique position to intercede and take steps to create collaboration or at least manage the conflict.

## Action Alternatives

Among the approaches administration may consider for correction of inequities are:

- changing the perception
- change the inputs:outputs ratios
- get others to change
- change the standards

Dr. Middleman recognizes that his tenure-track and clinical-track faculty are in conflict. He recognizes the source of the problem, and he recognizes that inequity must be addressed. Before initiating action, he should gather the facts and ensure that workloads, accomplishments, and rewards are equitable.

Dr. Middleman's initial response when confronted was to avoid the problem. He reflected about the environmental changes (the necessity for dual tracks, the directive to improve faculty practice outcomes, etc.) but elected not to discuss these mitigating forces with Dr. Tenyre. Therefore, efforts to manage the conflict and move from an initial posture of avoidance to negotiation or collaboration will be complicated.

In this situation, it is imperative that the department as a group as well as the individuals agree on a reward and value system. Perhaps an ad hoc group could be convened to define the issues and develop the guidelines for allocation of time, resources, and rewards. In an ideal environment, all parties should participate and agree on a resolution. However, this dental academic environment is not ideal. The faculty, whether on tenure track or not, are expected to demonstrate output in teaching, research, service, and professional development. The human condition requires individuals to prioritize their efforts and output. Frequently, an individual chooses to concentrate on the area of greatest interest or greatest reward. And, because they perceive their concentrated efforts as most important, they perceive others as less important. Therefore, feelings of inequity and manifestations of conflict may surface.

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## Conclusion

The case of the "stuck in the middle" faculty illustrates a realistic contemporary set of issues in dental education today: limited resources, faculty retention and remuneration, equity for faculty in a variety of roles and responsibilities, and the changing paradigm of faculty roles in dental education. This dynamic environment presents challenges, including creative problem solving, resource allocation, communication, and conflict resolution.

In the ADEA Leadership workshop, this case asks participants to act in the role of Restorative Department Chair. The participant is put into a situation where multiple conflicts have arisen, based on anticipated and unanticipated problems secondary to the implementation of new faculty academic tracks. The objective of the case is to provide workshop participants with an opportunity to discuss communication and conflict management strategies that could be used at different times from planning through implementation of the new program.

An effective leader in dental education should be able to take steps to reduce the potential for conflict in the planning and implementation of new paradigms, anticipate that unanticipated consequences will occur, and resolve conflicts in a positive way.

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