

Conflict Management & Difficult Conversations

Theme: “Taming the Zoo” • ABO Continuing Education • Timed Course Outline • 50 minutes (1.0 CE credit hour)

LECTURER & COURSE INFORMATION

Lecturer: Patrick Stifter, OD

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Framed around a “Taming the Zoo” theme, this course helps optometric and optical staff recognize and manage both workplace and patient conflict. Participants learn to distinguish healthy disagreement from tension and toxic conflict, identify five conflict-management styles through memorable animal metaphors, recognize their own style, and apply de-escalation and structured difficult-conversation techniques to common scenarios in the optical practice.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon completion, the participant will be able to:

1. Distinguish between disagreement, tension, and toxic conflict, and identify common triggers in the optical practice such as scheduling disputes, hand-off miscommunication, patient wait times, and lab or product errors.
2. Identify the five conflict-management styles using the “zoo animal” framework (Lion, Elephant, Dolphin, Turtle, Golden Retriever), and recognize their own and coworkers’ styles in order to adapt interactions at the dispensing table and across the optical team.
3. Demonstrate de-escalation and difficult-conversation techniques — including active listening, the B.L.U.R. model, and the Acknowledge–Apologize–Act sequence — to resolve upset-patient and peer-to-peer conflict in the optical setting.

TIMED COURSE OUTLINE (50 MINUTES)

1. Introduction & Course Goals Slides 1–2 • 3 min

- Welcome and theme: “Taming the Zoo” — understanding and managing different “animal” behaviors in conflict.
- Course purpose: help staff understand workplace and patient conflict and manage disagreements, de-escalate tension, and conduct difficult conversations effectively.
- Why it matters: impact on patient satisfaction, team efficiency, and practice success.
- Framing: be the “zookeeper” — recognize and adapt to different conflict personalities to maintain harmony.

2. What Conflict Really Is Slides 3–7 • 9 min

- The three faces of conflict introduced: disagreement, tension, and toxic conflict.
- Disagreement — a difference in ideas or perspectives; idea-focused, respectful, and often healthy and productive; positive when handled well.
- Tension — unresolved disagreement or competing priorities that create emotional discomfort; often unspoken; signs include short or passive responses, side conversations, and silence; escalates if ignored.
- Toxic conflict — personal, harmful conflict marked by blame, “you always/never,” sarcasm, and power struggles; destructive to morale and trust.
- Side-by-side comparison of focus, tone, and outcome; key message — disagreement is healthy, tension is a warning sign, and toxic conflict is a culture issue that must be addressed.

3. Understanding Conflict Styles — The Five Animals Slides 8–13 • 10 min

- Section framing: knowing the “creature” helps manage the chaos.

- Competing Lion — assertive, dominant, strong-willed; drives quick decisions but can intimidate others if overused.
- Collaborating Elephant — thoughtful, seeks win-win outcomes, values teamwork and consensus; slower but builds lasting solutions.
- Compromising Dolphin — flexible, seeks middle ground, cooperative yet strategic; balances needs efficiently.
- Avoiding Turtle — withdraws to stay safe; useful for low-stakes issues but can delay resolution if overused.
- Accommodating Golden Retriever — loyal, seeks harmony, prioritizes relationships; can feel one-sided if over-relied on.

4. Knowing Your Own Style Slides 14–16 · 7 min

- Section introduction: identifying your personal conflict “animal.”
- Interactive self-assessment / live poll — participants identify their own animal style.
- Styles at a glance: each animal paired with its core instinct; Zoo Tip — knowing your style helps you “speak animal language” and manage interactions effectively.

5. Conflict in the Optometric Workplace Slides 17–18 · 6 min

- Common optometric workplace conflicts: staff scheduling, hand-off miscommunications, upset patients over wait times or costs, tension between sales goals and clinical recommendations, and lab errors or product delays.
- When instincts go unchecked: how each style’s unchecked behavior surfaces as toxicity and affects the team; Zoo Tip — instincts keep us safe, self-awareness keeps us effective.

6. De-escalation & Difficult Conversations Slides 19–22 · 9 min

- De-escalation skills: calm body language and tone (mirror without mimicking); active listening / “looping back”; separating facts from emotions and avoiding absolutes; time-out strategy when tempers flare.
- Difficult conversation framework: preparation (clarify goals, gather facts, anticipate solutions) and the B.L.U.R. model — Begin with empathy, Lay out facts, Understand perspective, Resolve with options; avoid trigger and defensive language.
- Handling upset patients: Acknowledge → Apologize → Act; scripts for delays, insurance misunderstandings, and product errors; redirect anger toward problem-solving.
- Peer-to-peer conflict: private conversations when needed; handling repeated friction; appropriate escalation to management.

7. Preventing Conflict & Key Takeaways Slides 23–25 · 6 min

- Creating a culture that prevents conflict: regular team huddles, clear SOPs for frequent friction points, feedback without fear, and celebrating successful resolutions.
- Key takeaways: conflict is normal — unmanaged conflict is the problem; listen first and focus on solutions rather than blame; everyone shares responsibility for a healthy environment; frameworks, empathy, and de-escalation strengthen teamwork and patient trust.
- Close and open floor for questions.