SIMULATED INTERACTION

Challenging Conversation with a Client: Conflict Resolution

Overview

The objectives of this activity are to provide workshop participants an opportunity to analyze a real-time interaction between work colleagues who are having a disagreement. Based on concepts and discussions from the Workplace Communication workshops, participants will debrief to identify and clarify areas of disagreement and conflict between the two colleagues and propose some non-judgmental approaches on how best to manage this situation.

In this interaction there will be two Simulated Clients:

- **SC1** – Jesse (Colleague #1)
- **SC2** - Taylor (Colleague #2)

There will be two interactions demonstrated:

- **Interaction #1** – Modelling what not to do
- **Interaction #2** – Modelling a better approach

Each interaction should last between five to seven minutes.

Communication Issue

After **Interaction 1**, participants will debrief in a whole-group discussion to:

- Identify early signs of communication breakdown – behaviour, language, non-verbal cues.
- Suggest specific communication strategies and skills that SC1 could use to navigate this conflict.

The participants will then watch **Interaction 2** and observe how Jesse (Colleague #1) handles the conflict using a resolution framework. Again, they will debrief before engaging in their own role-play practice.

The following are success indicators for Interaction 2:

- Use of a conflict resolution framework:
    - **Acknowledge:** validate the other's perspective without necessarily agreeing

      "It must be frustrating..."
      "It doesn't seem fair..."
      "Yes, I've noticed those items as well..."

    - **Share your perspective assertively**: use phrases to say 'no' respectfully, use a diplomatic tone, maintain contact

      "I understand what you're saying...:
      "Well, actually, no, it hasn't..."
      "...feels like a personal attack."
      "I felt hurt and embarrassed..."

    - **Suggest a solution**: use "I" statements/neutral language/partnership words

      "I think it would be a good idea to..."
      "In my opinion..."
      "Why don't we...?"

      (ideas: an informal meeting with everyone to set ground rules for the kitchen and food storage; rotate a fridge monitor to oversee the kitchen every week/month)

    - **Invite collaboration**:

      "What do you think?"
      "Does that sound like a good idea?"

    - **Focus on shared goal(s):**

      "Let's..."
      "I'd like us to..."

Challenging Conversation: Kitchen Dispute

OVERVIEW

Jesse and Taylor work together at a small company. Today, Jesse came to the kitchen for lunch and found Taylor with Jesse's lunch box, getting ready to throw it in the garbage.

Food is kept in the lunchroom fridge. For the most part, things are kept reasonably in order but there seems to always be someone complaining about food being left too long by some people and having to be the one to clean things up and throw things out. There is a policy in place for the kitchen that states that all staff need to be mindful of their food, label containers, and throw out what has gone bad.

Jesse

You are relatively new to this company. You always put your name on your food so you're pretty sure that Taylor knows exactly what they were doing and who the container belongs to.

You are incensed and have arrived just in time to rescue your lunch before Taylor throws it out.

Now Taylor is extremely defensive and embarrassed to have been caught in the act. And they are striking out at you like this is somehow your fault.

You think that Taylor has no right to throw ANY food away without speaking to the owner. It's not only rude and thoughtless, but it's not up to Taylor to throw away anything that doesn't belong to them. You are feeling like this is more than a food issue – this is a personal attack. You believe there is no way someone could be this reactive to food without having another gripe against you. You are racing through your mind of what Taylor might have against you on a personal level.

Taylor

You have been working in the office longer than anyone. You have seen people come and go, and for the most part the current staff are a pretty good group.

But when it comes to the lunchroom, that has always been a trigger for you. You cannot bear the sight of moldy or expired food in the fridge. This has happened a lot over the years and it usually starts out well, with everyone promising to do their part, then it gradually disintegrates into a foul-smelling circus of unidentifiable containers and badly saran-wrapped fruits and vegetables. You are at a loss for how people could let their food become this way.

Over the years of dealing with this you have become ultra-sensitive to odours and lately the kitchen fridge is driving you crazy. You find yourself thinking often - who is bringing in these smelly curry dishes in and then not eating them? You notice things like salad dressing that literally no one is using and peanut butter jars that are old and gross. You don't understand what is wrong with your colleagues' food hygiene.

BACKGROUND
Behaviour, Demeanour and Appearance

- **Jesse:** exasperated, frustrated, angry
    - You are feeling frustrated confusion, as you do not understand this personal attack
- **Taylor:** defensive, angry
    - You are taken aback and feel that Jesse's reaction is ridiculous

Attire:

- **Both**: Business casual attire

Starting Position

- Both SCs will be facing the camera**. Note:** The lecturer will set the scene before the simulation and the participants will be asked to treat this as an in-person interaction and assume Jesse and Taylor are both in the company kitchen

HISTORY OF PRESENT PROBLEM

Jesse
You don't understand what issue Taylor might have taken up with you on a personal level, but you feel convinced there is one. Because you are a new staff, you are feeling a little bit ostracized. For the most part, you keep to yourself at work but are always pleasant. You don't get in people's way or leave your workspaces untidy. You don't tend to partake in staff socials, but you're not anti-social, either. You just value keeping your personal and professional lives separate. Especially because you don't know anybody that well yet. You are increasingly upset over the fact that people at work might not like you when there is nothing at all you have done wrong. You feel that you're good at your job, nice to your coworkers, and usually don't rock the boat. You don't know what else you can do.

This confrontation feels out of character for you, but you've just had enough of feeling this way. Now you're just angry. You're a clean and conscientious person; you don't understand what you have done to deserve this. You understand that Taylor is a long-standing employee, but they are not your supervisor.

Taylor
You've been at this company for a long time and seen a lot of "types" of coworkers. You see Jesse as a particularly hard to read co-worker. Jesse is always polite, but it feels like there's an aloofness about them. You get the sense that Jesse thinks they are better than the staff, especially long-tenured staff such as yourself and that they think they are above the rules. You feel that Jesse is too new to be stirring up issues in the workplace and this makes you think that Jesse is the entitled type.

You feel that you should be well respected in the workplace, and that what you say should go, because you have been here for so long. You're not an unreasonable person, you just might know better because you've seen a lot of staff come and go and you know what works and what doesn't work in this clinic culture.

You don't think that you are out of line in what you have done. There are clear policies in place that require staff to take care of their food and throw out what's been sitting in the fridge for too long and you swear you've seen this specific container in there for much longer than it should have been. There's a smell in the fridge and you are certain that this is what's causing it.

Both Taylor and Jesse
Both Taylor and Jesse have issues surrounding food hygiene, the reputation of the company and the work culture, and insecurities about seniority (new vs. longest tenure). You both consider yourselves to hold a lot of professional integrity. You are both feeling very vulnerable about this situation and wish that you had a better relationship with each other. Both of you will present these issues, in your own ways, so that the participants watching might be able to pick out the common ground that you share which then might be used as a strategy in Interaction #2.

AIM FOR THE PARTICIPANTS WATCHING THE INTERACTION

- To recognize miscommunication and other early signs of communication breakdowns in order to apply strategies that may prevent a conflict.

Interaction #1 (What Not to Do)

Taylor starts alone on camera looking really frustrated and angry.

Taylor: *" I can't believe this! I'm working with a bunch of pigs!"*

Jesse enters [*turns on camera]* just in time to see **Taylor** throwing out their lunch container.

Jesse: *"Hey, what are you doing? That's my lunch!"*

Taylor: *"Yah? Well, I'm throwing it out!"*

Jesse: ***"****What? Why?"*

Taylor: *"Why? Because it's rancid. Something is stinking up the fridge, and I know it's this container so I'm throwing it in the garbage!"*

Jesse: *"You can't just decide what to do with other people's food."*

Taylor: *"If food smells rotten, you get rid of it. It's not rocket science!"*

Jesse: *"Rotten? What are you even talking about? I brought that lunch today!"*

Taylor: *"Oh, no … this container has been in the fridge for weeks!"*

Jesse: *"No, it hasn't! I bring my food in the* ***same*** *container every day! It's always fresh!"*

Taylor: [makes a face*] "Fresh? I don't know what your idea of fresh is but the smell of it is making me sick! I am tired of people like you bringing their smelly lunches and stinking up the fridge!*

Jesse: *"Listen, you have no right to be doing this, and you know that … Who made you the boss of the fridge?"*

Taylor: ***"NO ONE*** *else seems to take responsibility for the fridge. It ALWAYS falls on me!"*

Jesse: *"Don't you realize how rude it is to pass judgement on the smell of other people's food?"*

Taylor: [sarcastically] *"Just because you're new doesn't mean we need your 'new' ideas on food* hygiene and kitchen etiquette."

Jesse: [sarcastically] *"It's not a 'new' idea to be considerate about other people's food."*

Taylor: *"Considerate about other people's food? What about being considerate about other people's sense of smell! If your lunch is any indication, you have no consideration of others and how your lunch smells. I don't even want to think about your office … it must reek of curry!"*

Jesse: *"Wow, that's totally unfair! You have no idea what you are talking about! You're jumping to conclusions, and you know nothing about me!"*

Taylor: *"I know your lunch stinks and I'm throwing it out."*

Jesse: *"If you're going to throw away my food, then you're going to owe me money!"*

Taylor: *"Owe you money? Don't be ridiculous! You owe ME! I'm the one keeping things sanitary here … preventing bacteria and mold in the workplace!"*

Jesse: *"I thought this was an OPEN and respectful work culture!"*

Taylor: *"And you are showing no respect for me or your co-workers!"*

Jesse: *"Last time I checked, you weren't my supervisor!"*

Taylor: *[Leans menacingly into the camera] Consider yourself lucky that I'm not!!"*

Taylor walks out [turns camera off] leaving **Jesse** looking shocked and exasperated.

Jessie: "*Wow … I feel like I've just been bullied."*

Jessie turns off their camera. **End of interaction.**

Whole Class Debrief (10 minutes)

Interaction #2 (A Better Approach)

Taylor starts alone on camera looking really frustrated and angry.

Taylor: *" I can't believe this! I'm working with a bunch of pigs!"*

Jesse enters [*turns on camera]* just in time to see **Taylor** throwing out their lunch container.

Jesse: *"Excuse me, what are you doing? That's my lunch!"*

Taylor: *"Yah? Well, I'm throwing it out!"*

Jesse: ***"****What? Why?"*

Taylor: *"Why? Because it's rancid. Something is stinking up the fridge, and I know it's this container so I'm throwing it in the garbage!"*

Jesse: [calmly] *"Okay, and why do you think it's* ***my*** *lunch?"*

Taylor: *"Because this container has been in the fridge for weeks!"*

Jesse: *"Well, actually, no, it hasn't. I bring my food in the **same** container every day so that's probably why you always see it in the fridge, but I don't leave it in there, I take it home every night, I wash it and then use if for my lunch the next day. So, my food is always fresh"*

Taylor: *"Well, how am I supposed to know that?*

Jesse: [Agreeing] *"Fair enough*. [Pause] *But I always put my name on my lunch container, which you must have seen, so if you were concerned about it, why didn't you just come to me and voice your concern? I'm totally approachable."*

Taylor: [Fumbling] *Yah, well … You may have brought it in "fresh" this morning, but whatever you brought is really pungent! And it is stinking up the fridge and the whole kitchen! What is it … curry? Ugh … I am just so tired of people like you bringing their smelly lunches and stinking up the fridge!*

Jesse: *"Yes, actually … it is leftover curry. I had no idea that it was giving off such a strong smell."*

Taylor: *"Yah, well I have a really sensitive nose to smells and the smell of your lunch is making me gag!"*

Jesse: [Slightly hurt and embarrassed] *"I'm so sorry … I'm not trying to offend anyone. I know that I am relatively new here … I thought I was following the rules .. is there some food policy that I'm not aware of?"*

Taylor: *"No, it's just that **NO ONE** else seems to take responsibility for the fridge. It **ALWAYS** falls on me! There are old salad dressing bottles that no one is using, peanut butter jars that are old, food people bring and never eat! I'm tired of cleaning up after them."*

Jesse: *"Yes, I've noticed those items in the fridge as well, but I've only ever just brought leftovers for lunch. I do realize that my curry does have a strong aroma, but to be honest, your reaction … well, it kind of feels like a personal attack. Did I do something else to offend you?"*

Taylor: [uncomfortable] *"I don't mean it that way. It's just that I've become very sensitive to smells and over the years I have seen a lot of people come and go at this company and nobody else seems to care about kitchen etiquette. I'm not everybody's mom. I didn't mean to take it out on you. I was a bit hasty in throwing that out. I'm sorry…"*

Jesse: *"It must be frustrating that people are not taking responsibility for their food in the fridge and that you feel that you are the only one staying on top of things."*

Taylor: *"It is frustrating … thank you for seeing that. Listen, I'm sorry about what I said about your curry."*

Jesse: *"It's okay. I reacted because I felt hurt and embarrassed. I love the smell of curry, but I can understand that not everyone else does. It's a favourite family recipe so I guess it kind of hurt my feelings when you said it smelled."*

Taylor: *"I don't think it was actually about the curry … I think that I was just so frustrated by having to clean out the fridge all the time that I took it out on you.*

Jesse: *"I understand what you're saying. It doesn't seem fair that you are always left to keep the fridge clean. Isn't there some kind of a policy around this?*

Taylor: *"Yes, but no one follows it!"*

Jesse: *"I think it would be a good idea to remind people that there is a kitchen policy. I'd like us to work together on this. Let's organize an informal meeting with everyone to set some kitchen ground rules. What do you think? "*

Taylor: *"Hmmm … I think I'd like that."*

Jesse: *"In my opinion, everyone should be participating in this, not just you. Why don't we come up with some kind of schedule for weekly fridge clean outs? We could assign a fridge monitor to oversee the kitchen every week or month on a rotating schedule. Does that sound like a good idea?*

Taylor: *"That sounds like a great idea!"*

Jessie: *"Okay, let's set up a meeting for next week."*

Taylor: *"Yes, let's do that."*

Jessie: *"And I'll try and be more aware of the types of food I bring for lunch. Curry is kind of a strong smell … but it tastes so good!"*

Taylor: *"I'm so sorry I threw your lunch away."*

Jessie: *"That's okay … I can just go grab something from the food court."*

Taylor: *"No, I think I owe you. Listen, I brought way too much food for lunch today. Would you like to share? It's a homemade pasta dish … also a favourite family recipe. How does that sound?*

Jessie: *"I would really like that. Thanks."*

Taylor and **Jessie** turn their cameras off. **End of interaction**.

Whole Class Debrief (10 minutes)

Followed by Role-play practice (20 minutes)