Wellbeing for the Bush
NAVIGATING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

What is conflict?

Workplace conflict is a disagreement between employees or groups and is a natural part of any workplace. It can occur from minor issues, such as personality conflict or work style clashes, or from more serious concerns, such as discrimination or harassment. In rural and remote health services, conflict can feel more personal because teams are small, people often hold multiple roles, and resources are stretched. When left unresolved, conflict can impact workplace culture, staff wellbeing, and client outcomes.

Conflict can be beneficial in that it can ignite innovation and strengthen team relationships. The key is *how* conflict is managed.

> *This advice is general information about day-to-day workplace conflict. It is not for bullying, harassment or psychological safety concerns. For these issues, seek support from your organisation, professional body, EAP, or Fair Work (https://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/contact-us). Support is also available 24 hours a day from the Bush Support Line on 1800 805 391.*

Understanding conflict

Conflict often arises when people perceive that their needs, values, or goals are in opposition. In rural and remote health settings, some common sources of conflict include:

- **Role/workload imbalances:** Overlapping responsibilities or uncertainty about scope of practice.

- **Communication challenges:** Misunderstandings or a lack of timely information.

- **Workload pressures:** Competing demands, stretched resources and staffing.

- **Cultural differences:** Understanding and managing cultural contexts, expectations and communications across diverse communities and professional disciplines.

- **Misaligned priorities or values:** Different approaches to client care or organisational goals.

Practical tips for managing conflict

- **Early recognition:** Notice early signs like withdrawal, sarcasm and irritation; consider appropriate action.

- **Pause and regulate:** Use deep breathing, grounding, or other stress-regulation techniques before responding.

- **Use clear, respectful communication:** Try "I" statements, active listening, and avoiding blame.

- **Focus on the issue, not the person:** Stay solution-oriented and specific.

- **Seek understanding of the context:** Stay curious; consider cultural, professional, and personal perspectives that could be shaping the situation.

- **Practical scripts:** Keep short, helpful phrases in mind: i.e., "I am concerned about ..." or "Can we step aside to clarify ...?"

- **Step back when needed:** Know when a break is better than pushing through during a situation that could escalate.

Protecting your mental health and wellbeing

- **Boundaries:** In small communities, personal and professional lives frequently overlap. Try to set clear boundaries, e.g., work stays at work.

- **Peer support:** Lean on trusted colleagues for support and debriefing.

- **Self-care strategies:** Focus on the small, achievable actions, such as staying hydrated, stepping outside during a break, and engaging in something you enjoy.

- **Accessing support:** You are not alone. EAP services, telehealth psychology, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health networks, the CRANAplus Bush Support Line (available 24/7 on 1800 805 391), and other professional networks are available.
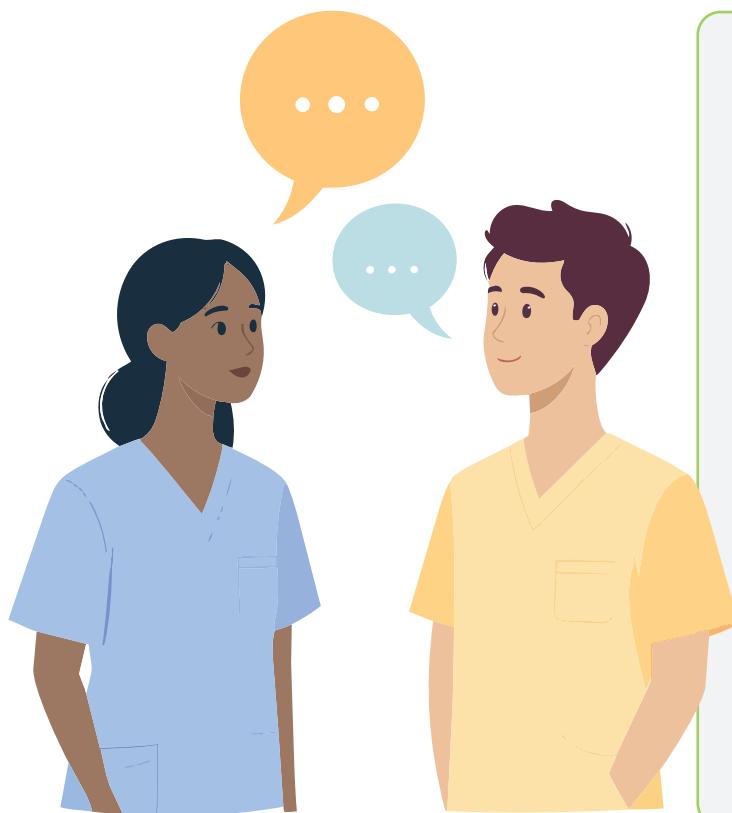
A conflict resolution checklist

- Can I identify the main issue, without placing blame?

- Am I prepared to listen as much as I speak?

- Do I understand the other person's perspective, including community or cultural context?

- Can I think of solutions that will benefit all involved?

- Have I debriefed with a trusted colleague, supervisor, or peer?

- Am I calm before I approach the person?

- Have I documented this?

- When will I follow up?

When to escalate

- If conflict involves bullying, harassment or discrimination

- If it impacts patient/client safety

- If efforts to resolve the issue have been unsuccessful

Document clearly and talk with your manager, People and Culture team, Union, or other designated senior workplace support personnel.