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Conquering Conflict with LNC Clients Leanne Meier

Pat: Hi, this is Pat Iyer with Legal Nurse Podcast, and today I'm talking to you about a topic that affects small business owners, and in particular legal nurse consultants who own businesses. And that is conflict that may occur between you and your clients, between you and your staff, and maybe other parts of your life as well.

I brought on the show a nurse who has 40-plus years of experience in clinical nursing, as well as experience in talent development, research, designing and teaching specialized programs, most particularly about conflict resolution. She consulted about conflicts between managers and employees, teams and individuals. And we know as legal nurse consultants that some of those conflicts can result in bad patient outcomes, which then come to us in the form of medical malpractice cases.

In 2017, she started hosting and has continued to host a talk show called "Once a Nurse, Always a Nurse," probably from that expression that we get asked as nurses of, "Oh, you were a nurse" and your response is, "I'm still a nurse. I don't lose that part of my training because I'm focused on a different aspect of nursing."

My guest today is Leanne Meier. Leanne, welcome to the show.

Leanne: Well, thank you so much, Pat. I am so, happy to be here. This is my favorite topic.

Pat: And, that may surprise some of our listeners because many of us don't like conflict, and we figure out how to run from conflict. Tell us why being involved with conflict resolution is a favorite topic.

Leanne: What I've learned is that if you can change just even one small aspect of how you deal with conflict or even how you look at conflict, you can significantly change the outcomes that you're having in your life when involved with conflict. And I found that to be very, very true.

Pat: And did you grow up in a household where your family was adept at handling conflict?

Leanne: Not at all. I appreciate my parents very much, but they did not learn how to deal with conflicts, so they could not teach us how to deal with conflict. And so, we had a fairly volatile, very competitive household, who could shout over everybody else and that kind of thing. And so, I didn't know there was any other way of dealing with conflict until I got out of the home, until I began to realize other people dealt with conflict in many ways.

I started to learn about it. I went to many conferences, I read a lot. I think probably the thing that most helped me learn was when I was asked to lead two separate conflict programs in my hospital organization that I was working with. One of them was managers' conflict and the other one was what we called "Taming the Conflict Dragon," which was for employees. As you keep teaching other people, you keep learning yourself. That became phenomenally important to me.

Pat: As you're talking about dealing with conflict, it makes me think of a time in my life when my mother-in-law came from India when our son was 7 months old, and she lived with us for eight long months. And in that period, my husband and I couldn't resolve conflict because she was always there. We couldn't get into an argument. We couldn't strategize. We pretended like nothing was wrong. And I developed this mental picture of sweeping things under the rug, and the rug got so high with these bumps and lumps all over the household. It took a good month or two after she left before we had straightened those issues out.

You grew up in the more volatile household, but when you avoid conflict and pretend that it doesn't exist, that can be detrimental to a relationship between you and a spouse, or you and a client, or you and an employee. Tell us a little bit about people's involvement with conflict? Is this a topic that people are comfortable with or they're curious about?

Leanne: I think curious from a distance. Most people say they really want to learn about conflict but when it comes down to doing that, they just avoid. You mentioned the sweeping under the rug, and I call that

“avoid” and a phenomenal number of people want to do that. In Minnesota several years ago, there was a study done that said 80 percent of Minnesotans use avoidance as their main or only way of dealing with conflict. I'm guessing there may be some change in that, but just observing my fellow Minnesotans, I think it's probably still close to true and I really don't know how that impacts other people. But the reality is conflict is one of those things like public speaking that people would rather be dead than must do it. And so, a lot of us avoid.

When I was getting ready to do this, I Googled conflict resolution and I got 248 million hits. There's a lot of stuff out there. As far as I can tell, much of it boils down to what Thomas-Kilmann put out. I think he was notable in the 60s or 70s. He has something people might be familiar with, a system called TKI, which is the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument and you learn about conflict.

What it boils down to with him and just about anything else you see, there's some aspect of five different styles that people deal with conflict. And one, the first one, is *avoid*, and we know what that is. We just want to get away from this situation, and I'm amazed how many people think that's the best way to handle it. I'm just going to avoid it and it's all going to go away.

The reality is it doesn't go away. It just builds and what you're saying to the other person is "You're not important enough to me to make myself uncomfortable to deal with this." And so, it's a very negative thing you're putting out, and people don't always realize that. There are times when you want to avoid, and that's when you're in danger, when you need some time to think, you need to get your emotions under control. All those things make it a good thing to avoid.

Accommodation is the second one. And people in health care, particularly have difficulty with this because many of us go into health care because we want to help. We want to be that person that fixes things, that makes it all okay. How we do that is we negate our own interests, and we just try to meet the interests of everybody else. When you do that consistently, people start to say, "She doesn't have any opinions. She doesn't really care," or "He doesn't really care." They stop asking you for your opinion or your input and they start to assume that they can

dump on you anything they want to: work, problems, whatever, and you will accommodate them. There's always a positive and always a negative. Everybody wants to work with an accommodator because you feel like they make you feel better. They are always willing to work with you, etc.

The next one in line is... Did you want to make a comment on that?

Pat: Well, I wanted to comment on that, Leanne, because that's the heart of what we run into working with trial attorneys.

Leanne: I believe that's true.

Pat: They can be unreasonable. They can be demanding. They can be self-centered. I'm being blunt. They can come to you, Leanne, and say, "I need this case by Monday morning, and I know it's Friday afternoon at 3:00, but it's really important that you do this for me." And then Monday morning comes, and the nurse has done the case, and the attorney takes months to pay the invoice.

And the nurse has got that hook. You put your finger right on it because I describe it as a hook that's in our body that says, "Oh, you need my help? I can help you. I've got the skills, you're my client, I'll do whatever is necessary for you." And then when we get into payment issues, we feel as if we've been taken advantage of and the attorney has found... and it's a small number, let me be clear. But the small number say, "I've got somebody who's going to do whatever I want and then I can get away with not paying the invoices that she's giving me."

Leanne: Exactly. I usually say that people that only use accommodation, it's like you have a "kick me" sign on your back. And you can't understand why people keep treating you this way because in your worldview, "I'm doing things because I care about other people, and I want to help them out and they are going to reciprocate and be just as caring and supportive of me."

And the reality is that especially people who are in positions of power and influence many times they are more on a competitive level where they want to win, and they don't really care who else loses. If they win, that's the important thing. That is kind of the basis of the bullying attitude. Oftentimes, it might be 20 percent of the people or even less

that you deal with, but those 20 percent are often the ones you spend 80 percent of your time frustrated with.

So, the key there is another style: *compromise* and *collaborate* are the same basic thing except for the amount of time you spend with it. And when you're trying for collaboration, that means everybody gets all of what they want. Obviously, that can't happen a lot of times. It can't happen in a short period of time. So, then you go to compromise.

So, if you're in that position, you're that nurse where the lawyer has just said, "Here goes your weekend. I need your time. In fact, I'm willing to pay you double. I just need to have this on my desk by Monday morning. I will be so grateful," whatever it is that they say. And you're like, "Sure, I only had a wedding to go to. Whatever else was going on in my life, I will put it aside because clearly this is a very important thing." The minute we say that without any conditions, we are giving them *carte blanche* to be able to do this to us again, to feel no problem. "If she didn't stand up for herself, I win."

And so, that's kind of what ends up coming back. We can certainly be that person who's accommodating, but at the same moment we need to say, "This is a big sacrifice for me to do this. And so, I will expect to have at least half of my bill when I present it. When I present the work to you on Monday morning, I will expect to receive half of my allotted money at that time and the other half within 60 days," whatever else you would say. "Maybe there's another project that you have me working on. I can do this project for you, but I'll have to push this other one aside. It might take me longer than 30 days to get back to you." So, now you've got a balance where this person is asking you to go out of your way to do something and you're saying, "I'm really willing to do that for you, but here's what: It's going to cost you."

Standing up to them, especially when you get to that point when they're ranting and raving while saying, "Well, you didn't really spend much time on this" and "You probably did this off the top of your head, so this is really not as valuable as you're giving the notice on the invoice." That's when nurses start to question themselves and say, "Well, maybe he's right." it's based on whatever. For me, 40 years of experience and

learning is not nothing. That is something that I can charge for because I have it, and many other people don't.

That's the hard part. Nurses have got to learn how to negotiate and they have got to learn to stand their ground when the other person begins to be a bully. For me, the best way that I can handle that, I mean, you just literally almost feel like somebody is blowing you over. Maybe they're even in your face nose-to-nose screaming at you. You must stand your ground and you must think of them as a 2-year-old. How would I handle a 2-year-old in this situation? Many times, so many nurses are mothers. It's like, "Okay, I got this." This person who is a competitive person, will respect you more for standing up to them than they will for caving to them.

I had a lot of very uncomfortable interactions with doctors. If any of the nurses have worked with doctors in their past, it's very similar. Because it's an area of power, and many times people with power see themselves as being above the laws, whether that is the societal laws, the social things that we all consider. You allow somebody to go in front of you if it's an older lady or something like that. You do all those social things when you're in company with other human beings. But people in that place of power, especially if they're in their own workplace where they feel the most powerful, they feel like they can do whatever they want to and they're being smart.

Pat: I think you brought up a great comparison because when you talk to nurses about standing up to doctors, they understand what's at stake and they feel secure in their clinical knowledge. But unless the nurse is working in the doctor's office, that doctor doesn't have control over their compensation.

Leanne: Exactly.

Pat: They're working as an independent business owner. They've put in, say 10 hours of work at \$150 an hour. If they can't collect on that invoice, that's direct money out of their pocket. So, the stakes financially are higher when you're working with an angry, irate lawyer, even though their behavior may mimic an angry, irate physician who, yes, can go to the Director of Nursing and complain about that uppity nurse on 3 West who talked back to him. But that's

very different than when you're trying to collect money from an attorney who is dissatisfied. I'll throw in, has access to a listserv in which he can put two or three sentences about, "Don't ever work with Leanne Meier because she's an unreasonable LNC. She did a terrible job for me. Stay away from her." That ups the stakes even more in terms of handling your reputation.

PAM PLEASE INSERT AN IMAGE SHOWING TOXIC WEBINAR IMAGE ON An IPAD. I've got complete online training for you called, "How to Deal with Toxic Clients". I know, you became a nurse because you enjoy helping people. You became a legal nurse consultant because you enjoy solving puzzles and working with attorneys. Then one of your clients loses his temper over an invoice, and you think, "I don't deserve to be bullied." You're going to lose a lot of money if you give in to the attorney.

In this free masterclass, you'll discover a step-by-step process for dealing with the conflict, so you don't lose control and don't cave in. Get the training at this link: <http://LNC.tips/toxic>.

Leanne: A lot of this is about relationship. If you have a relationship, it changes the dynamics a lot. If you do have a relationship with this person who maybe is known for occasionally blowing up, be able to discuss with them, not at that time when you're most angry, but to ask to sit down and discuss with them.

You must come from their point of view. What I have found, especially when people are very irate with me, I must give them time to get it all out. I feel like it's a big balloon that's full of air. Many times, when people start talking to us, denigrating us or talking down to us, we have the tendency to want to speak up and counter, "You're wrong. This is not what's going on." All that does is throw a little more oil on the fire and it just blows them up even more. What I have found to work is to be able to sit with them and say, "This has been a problem for me in this, this, this, and this way. I'm assuming it must be that you are also having a problem with the fact that we are conflicted on this point. Could you explain to me from your point of view what's going on?"

They will rant and rave or do whatever it is that they're doing and when they seem to have come to a stopping point, I usually say, "So, I'm hearing you

say...." I hate that it sounds so hokey, but it really does work. Because until they can agree that you understand what they are saying, you have not made your point. They will not accept anything more you have to say beyond that. If you can get them to say "Yes, that's what I mean" or if they say, "No, you don't quite have it." "Please, would you tell me a little bit more so that I can understand." You're doing everything very professionally, very openly to them. You're showing them that you are willing to be open to what they have to say.

And then as they get wound down, oftentimes I find they'll do like a big sigh, like a sigh. You'll say,

"Do you feel like you've gotten it all out?"

"Yes, I feel much better."

"Well, I'm glad, and I'm glad that I can hopefully understand a little better where you're coming from. Would you be willing to hear how this is working for me?" At that point they've spent 20 minutes, half hour, an hour of your time, whatever it was, running through all of what they think is wrong. It's hard for them then to say, "Sorry, I can't listen to you." Usually they will, and they're already calmed down at that point. They've made sure they got out all their points and they're more likely to be able to relax and hear what you have to say.

Once you can do that, you still must put it in their language. And that, (especially if you're a legal nurse, you've been around the legal world, the language of legalese), all those things, but still it helps if you can understand where their personality is coming from. If they're a competitive kind of person, they feel like they must win no matter what. That is where you're coming from is to try and help them understand from your point of view, but also through their lens. How many times do you send out an invoice to a client who refuses to pay you? What does that do for your office?

Depending on who the client is, if it's thousands of dollars or millions of dollars, that can be an extremely difficult thing. It goes into you may have to sue that person. They start to begin to understand. "Okay, I see your point." You talk about their schooling. Look at all the training you've had and the experience you've had. Are people sometimes paying, not

for your time, but for your experience, the knowledge that you already have? Well, sure, yeah, of course. Suddenly each of their arguments starts making more sense when it comes back to, "This person has similar difficulties to mine. I need to be more accepting of them."

If you can leave the situation where they feel intact, not torn down or dismantled, it's more likely that they are going to behave better. What I found with doctors is that they will come back. From then on, once they have seen that I am going to stand up to them, I'm going to be professional, but I am going to get my point across to them, they start to appreciate that I have as much to offer as they do. Perhaps they need to listen to what I have to offer that they don't have.

Many of those doctors have come back and said, "Anything you want, Leanne. You tell me, I'm right there for you." And I think it must be the same when you get into it. I know that it feels like that the money aspect of it is not equal. It isn't and that's where much of conflict comes in, when you've got somebody who has less power than the person who has more power. So, as that person with less power, you must be smarter, you must be more confident of what you're doing. You may have to do a practice session kind of like this in front of somebody, who maybe knows that other person and just do a roleplay to practice what feels good coming out of your mouth, what seems to hit that other person in a more positive way, so that as you are meeting with them, you are already at a more confident level.

I know that was a long explanation.

Pat: Yeah, lots of great points. And I like drawing on experiences that the attorney will understand. One of the big sources of conflict that I found in providing expert witnesses was that the attorney would develop in his or her own mind several hours that the attorney thought the expert should have spent going through the records. And that reality was very different, that expectation was very different. "It should only take her two hours to go through the report," but the medical records were not organized, out of order.

Leanne: Maybe not accessible.

Pat: Yes, maybe incomplete. Maybe sometimes the expert was inexperienced and because of that learning curve would charge for every minute instead of being able to pull back and say, "I think I'm spending more time than I should be on this section, let me move on or cut those hours off my invoice." You can say to the attorney, "Have you ever had a client question your bill in terms of how many hours you spent on a case?" That will work.

Leanne: All the time.

Pat: Yes, and that would work well on the defense side. The plaintiff's side, if they're working on contingency fees, they may not be billing on an hourly basis. In my experience, it's usually the plaintiff attorneys who carried on more about what they perceive to be as excessive hours than defense ones. But connecting it to something that they understand is important. Also, the strategy that I used was to when they were finished, they had exhausted all of their complaints, I would make sure I understood their perceptions and then I would say, "I need to talk to the person who was involved in this," who in this case might be one of my experts. I would say, "I want to understand what happened from their perspective, and then we'll talk again. "

They knew what the next step was, but meanwhile it gave me a chance to recover from that blast, that shaky feeling that you get inside when somebody is just coming after you and coming after you and coming after you. I want to just hang up the phone and say, "Leave me alone," and there's an emotional toll to the conflict resolution that maybe you want to speak to us a little bit about how you handle your emotions when you're being blasted in that situation.

Leanne: That is such a good question. I have a very tender heart, I'd say, and my entire life when I get very emotional, whether it's a positive thing or negative thing, the first thing I do is cry. And, of course, in that kind of a professional situation, the worst thing that you can do, and even like in health care, you're in a surgery and the surgeon is screaming at you. What I have found is that in that moment, if I feel like I'm not going to be able to handle what's going on at that moment, I try my best to be able to say, "Sir," or whatever the person's name is, "I understand what you're saying is very, very important to you. It's important to me too, and I am not able at this moment to be able to

give it the justice, the time of justice I need to do. What I'd like to do is make an appointment with you. Could we meet this afternoon at 4:00 in your office and discuss this?"

It allows that person to let go because they know you're not going to avoid them. You are going to come back. They're going to have another opportunity to go at this with you. It gives them some time to cool down. It gives you some time to cool down and put your thoughts together, and your points together. It gives you some time to maybe talk to a friend and just get this off your chest. Maybe you need to go running. Do anything you could do that helps relieve that stress feeling of emotion, especially if you're feeling like you're about to burst into tears any moment.

It's something like anything else in nursing you train yourself to do. You can be in a horrible situation with somebody who has terrible injuries, and you learned you don't show your emotions. You don't show the disgust you're feeling by what you're looking at or smelling or whatever else. Same thing when you're dealing with something that somebody is doing something that is verbally or visually disgusting to you. But the main thing is you must make sure they understand you're not brushing them off. You can see it's important to them. "It's important to me. I want to make time in my schedule to give us both some time to talk about this."

Oftentimes it's surprising. They will back down and say, "Okay." They may negotiate with the time when it's going to be, but at least when you get back together, they've had enough time to think about it and whatever. It may not even have been you that set them off. It may have been what the lawyer said to them before or the judge in another case said to them or whatever that sets them off. And they're taking it out on you because for whatever reason they feel like they can get away with it. So, if you say, "No, they can't" and they learn, "I better not do this to Leanne" or "I better not do this to Pat because she's going to stand up to me" and they may apologize.

Pat: I think you just made a great point because we don't know what's going on in the lives of the people on the other end of the phone. Practicing law is very stressful, and I don't know that I emphasize that enough in the podcast. Attorneys will talk about the good old days

when lawyers were gentlemen, and it's usually they're talking about when most lawyers were men and they treated each other with respect and courtesy. A lot of that has disappeared, so, they're constantly caught up in an adversarial nature where judges are making rulings that influence their cases.

Unhappy clients are pushing them for decisions and what's going on with my case. They may have internal office politics and personnel issues that they're handling. Claims adjusters are struggling with caseloads and maybe not getting back to attorneys, or the checks are not coming in the mail as often as they need to for plaintiff attorneys. There's a great deal of stress and there's also, from a medical perspective, there's a fairly high number of attorneys who end up dying from stress-related illnesses because of this where just one piece of their day may be filled with more animosity than you and I, Leanne, ever want deal with. This was one of the reasons why I never followed the advice of my clients who said, "Pat, you ought to go into law school." "No, I don't think so. Too much conflict."

Leanne: Yeah. And there are people who go into it because they like the adrenaline rush of that competition. And it is, it's tremendous competition. It takes having your brain on its best level at all times and for some people that feels exciting.

Pat: It is exciting for some people, and you must know if that's what you're cut out for. And there are so many aspects of law that attorneys can practice that don't involve that level of conflict. Like intellectual property law or constitutional law are things that don't involve going into the courtroom or going into the deposition and getting into conflict with your adversary.

Leanne: I think it's very important to remember that you are in charge of you only. You cannot control how the other people are going to respond to you. What you can do is prepare yourself for any number of different kinds.

I remember what it was, that being listened to is so important that people will pay for it. And that's really what hiring a lawyer is. That's what hiring a psychiatrist or psychologist is. That's having a great friend you take out to dinner so that they will listen to you. And I think many times

lawyers are in the situation where they may not feel listened to. To have somebody who take some time out of their schedule to sit down and really listen to them can be phenomenally beneficial. And not just in this one instance but going forward.

Pat: Leanne, how can our listeners find out more about you, what you offer, and your talk radio show? Give us some details about that, please.

Leanne: Well, first, you can find me on LinkedIn. LinkedIn always has all those numbers, so I don't know what those are. I am on Facebook and I have just launched a new website called onceanurse.com. So, I understand there's a couple of glitches there, but you would be able to contact me, ask me questions, make suggestions, and that sort of thing.

The radio show that I do is an international talk radio show through voiceamerica.com so, it's online. And then once you go to voiceamerica.com, you click on the icon for "Health and Wellness." And then if it is Monday here, my time Central time is noon, Mountain time 11 AM, Pacific time, 10:00 AM and Eastern time, 1:00 PM, it will just be on when you go in. Otherwise, if you want to listen to the podcast, you can go in any time, sort of the same thing. Go to "Health and Wellness" and then click on the host. They will come up with an alphabet.

My last name is Meier, so M. And then you just scroll to find my podcast. It's listed there. Once you click there, it takes you to my host page and you have access to... I've done over 120 shows, so, on almost at any topic you can think of. And I'm eager to even take on those conflictual topics because I think it's important for people to have that opportunity to hear more than one side of the story when they're not in the fray. They're not in the argument.

And then leannevoiceamerica@gmail.com is my email address that I'd love to hear from people. Right now, there's about 86,000 listeners to my show and to the podcast in about 60-plus countries.

Pat: Excellent. And what a reach and the ability to connect with nurses all over the world.

Leanne: Yes, it's so exciting and it's amazing how much similarity there is. That's one thing I thought is that the problems in America might not translate to other places in the world. They do.

Pat: I gave a talk a few years ago in Australia that included bullying in health care as one of the topics. I watched the reactions of my audience. There are bullying physicians all over the world as an example.

Leanne: There are bullying people all over the world. And I always question what I keep in the back of my mind is this bullying comes from a place of not feeling strong about themselves. So, a low self-esteem. You wouldn't think it would be true, but it's amazing how many people that's really where it's coming from.

Pat: Leanne I appreciate you sharing your expertise with our audience. Thank you so, much for spending your time with me.

Leanne: This was fun, and I will be eager to welcome you to my show in the future.

Pat: Excellent.

Leanne: Thank you so much.

Pat: You're welcome. And for you who's listening to this, I hope you got some tips out of this. What came home to me was the importance of providing that angry person enough time to let that balloon deflate, as Leanne described. And then to give back to that angry person the understanding that you've been listening by paraphrasing what you heard. And then drawing on experiences that angry person has had with similar issues to show them that, yes, these types of issues may affect you in your practice. "How do you feel when somebody is questioning your hours or your charges or your competence in doing your work as an attorney?"

I think we also highlighted how much stress there is in the life of a trial attorney. And that we should be careful not to take these conflicts personally because there may be a whole series of unpleasant events that proceeded that attorney's day. You were just one of those phone

calls that had to be completed to discuss an issue that the attorney was upset about.

Leanne stressed being clear that you gained more respect when you stand up to the attorney than when you cave in and give the attorney what he's asking for. Because that just shows that you can be walked on and you may have several other cases. The attorney then feels that he can question those invoices as well because you responded by cutting off hours on the one that he was unhappy with.

Leanne: Exactly. Excellent job of rephrasing what we said over 30 minutes. I'm very impressed.

Pat: Thank you, Leanne and I enjoy having you on the show. I appreciate you, my listener who's part of this podcast. Be sure to tell other legal nurse consultants about Legal Nurse Podcast. We are now in our fourth year. We started in 2016 in September and we continue to bring you two shows a week. Be sure to come back next week, we'll have a new guest and a new topic.

Thanks.

Do you have lots of questions about being a legal nurse consultant? Are you wondering how to get clients, grow and manage a business, and dig into medical records? Do you feel a bit lost?

I've got a phenomenal resource for you just waiting on LegalNurseBusiness.com. My online training and books are designed to help you discover ways to strengthen your skills and businesses. Check them out at legalnursebusiness.com.

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Are you interested in building your LNC business by getting more clients, making more money and avoiding expensive mistakes? The LNCAcademy.com is the coaching program I offer to a select number of LNCs. You get my personal

attention and mentorship so that you can excel and build a solid foundation for your LNC practice. Get all the details at LNCAcademy.com.